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Is It Safe?: The Corrosion of Epistemology in Melville's Later Fiction

Raymond Daoust

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Abstract

Is It Safe?: The Corrosion of Epistemology
In Melville's Later Fiction

Raymond Daoust

The central concern of this thesis is to outline the presence of a particular theory of knowledge within some of the more prominent later works of Herman Melville. An effort is made to demonstrate that Melville's epistemological position bears a resemblance to that of David Hume, the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher.

This overall goal of linking Melville's thought to that of Hume is pursued by closely examining the philosophical significance of a recurring structural pattern, one that suggests the presence of an inquiry undergoing a progressive but ultimately corrosive change. The reading facilitating this perspective is one that rests largely on deconstructive premises.

The theory of knowledge attributed to Melville, however, is not held to be entirely Humean. Two major deviations from this stance are also examined in this thesis. The first concerns an implied theory of language, one that is linked in spirit to what can presently be viewed as Derridean deconstruction. The second departure from Hume is the obtrusive presence of a concept of God.

For Betty

`Is it safe?'
`Is what safe?'
As patiently as ever: `Is it safe?'
`I don't know what you're talking about.'
No change in tone: `Is it safe?'
Babe's voice was starting to rise: `I can't tell you if something's safe or not unless I know what you're asking, so ask me specifically and I'll tell you if I can.'
`Is it safe?' the bull-shouldered man said...
`I can't answer that.'
`Is it safe?'
`I don't know - don't you hear me? - I do not know - tell me what the `it' refers to.'
`Is it safe?' Like a machine.
`Yes...It's very safe. It's so safe you wouldn't believe it. There. Now you know.'
`Is it safe?'
`You don't like `yes', I'll give you `no', it isn't safe - very dangerous. Be careful.'
`...Is it safe?'...Babe...was not surprised when the bull-shouldered man started to move, to begin effecting changes.

William Goldman, Marathon Man

`...you go in for the night; you close your door behind you - thus. Now, is all safe?'

Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man

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INTRODUCTION

At the risk of being simplistic it could perhaps be concluded that all exercises in epistemology are concerned primarily with the issues of what can be known and how one can be certain that one knows it. In mundane circumstances questions of knowledge, particularly knowledge as certainty, are frequently associated with and even on occasion compressed into questions of safety. From this particular angle of approach any epistemologist (and by implication almost any conscious human being) wishes to determine if the world is in fact a safe place. Who or what can be trusted? More often than not the increased rigor of such an inquiry generates the impression that these questions, however vital, are best left unasked and unanswered.

Herman Melville, however, chose a somewhat more dangerous route. From **Moby-Dick** onwards much of his work is permeated by repeated efforts to discover why questions of knowledge are so resistant to satisfactory study; the

consequence is a portrayal of human existence as catastrophe. In the Melvillean landscape lives transpire against a backdrop of such opacity that there does not exist anything remotely secure enough to be characterized as knowledge. Instead no one escapes the limits of mere belief or opinion. The world, it turns out, is distinctly unsafe.

Within the broad sphere of Melville criticism the subject of epistemology, never immensely popular, has received just enough attention to suggest that some areas of Melville's work remain at least partially unexplored. The nature of this scholarly attention, however, has been diverse not only with respect to approach but also with respect to conclusions.

Approaches to Melvillean epistemology can be divided broadly into two categories, those works invoking the issue of knowledge through indirection without rigorously examining the term and those more actively engaged with strictly epistemological concerns. The former category would consist of studies by authors such as Charles Feidelson, Terence Martin and John Irwin (see bibliography). In the latter category would be found the contributions of Robert Zoellner, Paul Brodtkorb, Barbara Johnson, Nancy Roundy and Howard Horsford (all cited in the bibliography).

Attempts to articulate a Melvillean theory of knowledge have yielded results which are sometimes sketchy and almost always resistant to unanimous endorsement. For Robert

Zoellner and Paul Brodtkorb Melville's epistemological foundations are viewed as essentially Kantian. Nancy Roundy, however, believes that Melville advocated a position which appropriated ideas from both Locke and Kant. How this was achieved specifically is not explained in any detail. Terence Martin, in an interesting historical account of the influence of Scottish common sense philosophy on American literature, implies a very general Melvillean stance by suggesting that Melville opposed the so-called "common sense" view that one could easily accept the validity of Christian morality as well as the notion that the external world operated pretty much as appearances indicated.

Other scholars have grappled with epistemology through a close examination of literary devices or narrative execution. Both Charles Feidelson and John Irwin have tracked symbolic resonances in Melville's work which point toward the undecipherable. Irwin's focus on the expanding significance of the hieroglyph, for example, is particularly effective in suggesting that Melville was skeptical of any alleged capacity to comprehend either the external world or the self. Barbara Johnson, in a powerful deconstructive analysis of **Billy Budd**'s unstable narrative, conveys an impression of interpretation in the Melvillean world as an exercise inescapably threatened by the paralyzing potential of multiple possibilities.

Despite these intriguing explorations it is evident

that the nature of Melville's epistemology has not been subjected to the sort of rigorous analysis which would permit a reader not only to trace its dynamics consistently within the fabric of Melville's fiction but also to characterize this theory of knowledge with a view toward excavating some of its component parts.

With this in mind the principal purpose of this thesis will be to suggest that the theory of knowledge endorsed by Melville is closely related though not identical to that of the eighteenth century British philosopher David Hume.

This critical perspective on Melville has been alluded to on a number of occasions in the past. The approach implemented by many scholars, however, has been one in which the presence of a Humean vision within Melville's work has been noted without any accompanying effort to highlight the means by which the systematic nature of Hume's thought can be shown to have been transcribed quite carefully into the fabric of Melville's world of collapsing certainty. Among the scholars having adopted this more cursory approach are Willard Thorp, William Braswell, H. Bruce Franklin, Dorothee Finkelstein, Warner Berthoff, Peter Bellis, Bruce Grenberg, John Samson and Morton Sealts (see bibliography).

Only Howard Horsford, in a brief 1962 article (see bibliography), has engaged himself somewhat more seriously with Melville's relation to Hume by discussing how some of **Moby-Dick**'s argumentation mirrors that of Hume.

Having said this it is important to add that David Hume was and is for many the principal exponent of an epistemological skepticism which has come to be known as radical skepticism, a benchmark in the ongoing development of the broader field of British empiricism. In the Humean scheme of things minds and objects are so obscurely constituted that so-called human experience transpires in a haze within which it is not possible to maintain with certainty that there exist entities capable of being known. Instead Hume posits an ongoing stream of impressions each of which is disconnected from every other. With this removal of a sense of continuity linking individual impressions Hume has effectively opened the door to a pervasive randomness. If this is acknowledged to be a feasible state of affairs one can no longer posit a universe populated by other things and people and this in turn suggests that there can be nothing which one could claim to "know" since one must first agree that something exists before maintaining that it can be known. The terminal point of this line of inquiry is epistemological paralysis.

Discussion of Hume's epistemology within this thesis will focus exclusively on Book I of his work **A Treatise Of Human Nature** where his views on this matter are conveyed with the greatest force and clarity. No effort will be made to relate Melville to subsequent works by Hume nor will there be an attempt to reconcile the views of Hume the

philosopher with those of Hume the man since it is his early theoretical position which is of greatest relevance here. Beyond this the reading of Hume adopted in this study is largely faithful to that of A.J. Ayer as expressed throughout **The Central Questions Of Philosophy** and **Hume**.

Bearing in mind that the field of Melville scholarship has achieved the status of a worldwide industry it is virtually impossible for a single researcher to hope that he or she can track all that has been produced in this area. While writing this thesis it was also necessary to impose a cut-off time for further research. Given these constraints, however, a considerable amount of research has indicated that no one has published a substantive study in which Melville's work is aligned to that of Hume. As a consequence it will become apparent that in this thesis the existing scholarship has by necessity been utilized quite often to substantiate what may appear to be minor points. This strategy has been adopted in the hope that by building up smaller and more preliminary arguments in an incremental fashion, the larger original case to be made can be shown not only to have a more recognizable validity but also an understandable place in Melville criticism.

This thesis will focus primarily on Melville's later fiction beginning with **Moby-Dick**. From this novel onwards it is my view that many of his works are actively engaged with the shared problem of questions of knowledge. Some

(**Moby-Dick**, "Bartleby The Scrivener" and **Billy Budd**) explicitly deal with the impossibility of achieving knowledge as certainty while others (**The Confidence-Man**, "Benito Cereno" and even **Pierre**) powerfully illustrate this predicament. More significantly, however, the specific works cited above are so susceptible to being viewed from this perspective that when taken together they provide what I believe to be the most consistent, coherent and reasonably progressive or incremental look at the crucial nature of Humean knowing in the Melvillean world. This, aside from the practical need to keep one's focus and goals within a manageable range, has determined the decision to exclude the earlier novel **Mardi** and the later epic poem **Clarel**.

Within the context of these stipulations this thesis attempts to carry out a reading of Melville's work which emphasizes the philosophical significance of the pervasive presence of a particular structural pattern, one whose constituent parts represent the means by which epistemological inquiry is shown repeatedly to corrode such that the loss of knowledge as certainty is associated with the loss of safety.

This structural pattern, appearing at first glance to be a seemingly disparate body of configurations, has seven essential components that are often inter-related. Among these are the sub-themes of accident and preference, indicators from what could be called provisionally at best

the "external" and "internal" worlds respectively that the inexplicable is inescapable. In addition there will also be an examination of two types of recurring characters. The first is the character whose nature effectively eludes definition while the second is that of the failed thinker, the person unable to carry out an act definition or understanding when it is most necessary.

Melville's patterned evocation of an epistemological inquiry also entails an ongoing attachment to metaphors whose resonance suggests an extension and deepening of the issues of inexplicability and the inadequacies of reasoning. The most prevalent of these are the vocations of the law and institutionalized religion. Operating along similar lines are a number of symbols equally devoted to the subversion of stability and order, the most common being those associated with color.

The final component of the pattern to be tracked in this thesis is the slow but steady emergence of a concept of God. Skepticism notwithstanding the God revealed in this particular reading is one implied to be the orchestrator of epistemological alarm.

Although it will not be my position that all of these elements always appear together in every work examined, nonetheless it will be demonstrated that whenever they do appear they contribute to an overall scheme of consistent speculation.

The theoretical perspective underlying the reading characterized above is one which, though relying on an analysis of frequently appearing structural forms, is nevertheless rooted in assumptions and attitudes toward language that to some degree are also deconstructive. It should be stressed here that no effort is being made in this thesis to legislate a reading of Melville nor will there be any attempt to say all that can be said about any of the texts to be discussed. Other theoretical perspectives and thematic interests would presumably yield different readings equally worthy of scholarly consideration.

As was noted earlier the relevant Melville texts suggest a progressive epistemological development. In this thesis an effort will be made to demonstrate that this development can be viewed as an inquiry which transpires in three reasonably distinct phases, the first consisting of **Moby-Dick**, "Bartleby The Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno", the second uniquely represented by **The Confidence-Man** and the third embodied within **Billy Budd**. These works establish through the related structural elements described above a pattern of persistently circling or hovering over questions of knowledge. Thus it is important to recognize that although Melville's epistemology can be said to some degree to evolve in a linear fashion, this evolution is simultaneously characterized by familiar repetitions consisting of a greater concern for details relating to

problems first encountered in earlier phases.

Notwithstanding **Pierre**'s relevance to Melville's theory of knowledge I will not be devoting a separate chapter to my study of it since its dealings with problems of this nature are not of the concentrated variety found in other works. However, I will be referring to it at key points throughout my thesis as a source of symbols and metaphors which will buttress and clarify my examination of epistemological questions viewed elswhere at closer range.

The progressive nature of the epistemological inquiry to be discussed here alludes not only to the matter of chronology but in a subtler way to the issue of biography. There will certainly be an effort to examine the relevant works in a chronological fashion and to divide them into the three phases just described. The question arises as to how one could distinguish these phases and their likely order if they were not connected to a particular author and to publication dates.

The position adopted in this thesis is such that on the basis of the kind of reading to be carried out the chronology of Melville's epistemological phases can be inferred in the absence of most biographical data. For example this analysis will focus primarily on repetitions of the structural elements already described in such a way that alterations in their successive presentations will be shown to be predictable and thus consistent with the notion of one

particular set of beliefs undergoing steady articulation and simultaneous exhaustion. From this one could conclude that the concept of chronology invoked here is more a matter of logical than temporal progression.

As for the question of biography the sole contact with its relevance will be to acknowledge that the works examined were indeed written by someone who once inhabited the everyday world. With this admittedly important historical fact linking these works in a manner which precludes the random selection of any or all literary texts known to exist, the concern of this thesis is predominantly with the Melville who emerges from the angle of a specific critical reading. This will be a textual Melville. Consequently the epistemology formulated need not be attributed to Melville the man and the further question of whether this historical Melville had actually read David Hume is of little relevance given the theoretical assumptions underlying such a reading. However, notwithstanding these theoretical considerations, it may be of interest to note that two of Melville's novels contain references to Hume, Redburn (380) and The Confidence-Man (117), the former not falling within the purview of this thesis. In addition there are indications (see Braswell) that Melville held Hume's philosophy in high regard, perhaps sufficient evidence for some that the historical Melville had indeed read the eighteenth century skeptic.

Having fleshed out the essential features of the epistemological position which emerges from the reading of Melville defined in this chapter, it will be demonstrated as mentioned earlier that many facts of Melville's stance are faithful in spirit to the perspective of David Hume. There are two significant ways, however, in which Melville can be said to deviate from Hume. The first of these relates to God and God's likely nature.

Although Melville's work goes to great lengths to undermine knowledge in a strikingly Humean fashion the persistent failure to achieve a recognition of stability or order presents itself as a peculiarly paradoxical manifestation of some different order, one ultimately attributed as an article of faith to a deity for whom pervasive, calculated ambiguity is an instrument of divine terrorism. In this manner skepticism and theism negotiate a bizarre alliance.

Equally important is Melville's exploration of the indeterminacy of language, his second major deviation from a Humean approach. As the three phases of Melville's inquiry unfold it becomes evident that problems relating to signification rise in prominence. The manner in which they do so implies the presence of a theory of language not unlike that of Derridean deconstruction. For Derrida signifiers are effectively circular, pointing to nothing but other signifiers and thus never facilitating one's access to

anything functioning as a referent. Some would say that the consequence of such a predicament is the disappearance of the possibility of knowledge.

Within this thesis some effort will be made to discuss Melville's epistemology in the light of this view of language although it must be stressed that it is not the concern of this thesis to engage in a protracted polemic on the nature of deconstruction. What will be emphasized is the means by which a vision of linguistic indeterminacy is made to complement Humean skepticism. There will be no suggestion that what I see as Melville's early evocation of a deconstructive condition of language follows causally from or precisely mirrors Hume's philosophy.

Literary criticism has frequently relied on the added perspective of historicism as a means of situating authors and their works within a broader context of forces whose systematic inter-relationships could be posited as a clockwork of the past still accessible to a stable, comprehensive examination. Something of a literary cosmology, this remains an understandably appealing methodology yielding fruitful results where the assumptions underlying exercises in historicism are endorsed comfortably. The theoretical position adopted throughout this thesis, however, is one which views historicism as a problematic preoccupation.

Defining Melville in historical terms would presuppose

at least a tacit acknowledgment that the past is susceptible to containment such that it can be defined or frozen by scholars of the present who are unable to actually reinhabit the era under study. Furthermore this particular process can only be carried out through the production of narratives inextricably bound to what this writer considers to be operations of language never fully understood. When it is further considered that historical investigation in the literary sense seeks to clarify the presence of intellectual or creative influences, it is difficult to avoid noting that such causal connections must be evaluated not only in the light of how much of the past may have been lost unnoticeably to a researcher but also how one could safely posit actual influences where access to the private mental acts of an author who died a century ago has been denied.

What follows is an attempt to defend a reading of Melville's later fiction as a sustained assault on the notions of certainty and safety. Encrypted within this strategy is the persistent implication that the disappearance of each reflects an unseen agenda of war instigated by a higher power whose maneuvers are both unceasing and ultimately unbeatable. In this manner Melville engaged himself with a number of those questions which, once articulated, cannot be made to recede. Epistemology, not for the first time, terminates in annihilation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OUTLINE OF TERROR

P A R T O N E

MOBY-DICK

With the publication of Moby-Dick Melville glided inconspicuously into a shadow-world of hazardous speculation from which his subsequent work indicates there was no possibility of departure with any degree of epistemological intactness. From this point on his work, according to my reading, was locked into an ominous pattern of circling over the recurring problem of the mind's persistent failure to cope with the opacity of so called "human experience", a circling not unlike the tendency in even the most judicious of bystanders to continue viewing the details of a disaster long after prudence has sounded an alarm. The external world, for Melville, remains threateningly veiled, subverting even the most sincere and painful efforts to achieve what might be thought of as epistemological safety while simultaneously commanding one's continued but vulnerable attention.

In my discussion of Moby-Dick my principal concern will be to outline the presence in the novel of that structural matrix which I believe embodies the nature of Melville's epistemological preoccupations. Thus my goal is not only to demonstrate that many of the component parts of this matrix can indeed be found in the novel but also to illustrate the manner in which they engage themselves with questions which are epistemological at their root. However, I should

emphasize that my analysis of Moby-Dick may appear from some perspectives to be a brief one.

The reasons for this acknowledged brevity are several. Admittedly Moby-Dick is regarded more often than not as Melville's richest and perhaps most rewarding work. If one were so inclined, a comprehensive thesis on some aspects of Melvillean epistemology could be produced by focussing exclusively on this text. My thesis, however, attempts to situate various works within a more global epistemology consisting of three fairly distinct phases. In the light of this Moby-Dick is merely one part of the first phase, a phase within which shorter works like "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" are as significant epistemologically as the novel which so often appears to dwarf them. In addition I would also stress that my analysis of the above-mentioned structural matrix will not entail tracking this pattern throughout the novel since its significance is heightened in large part by its reappearance throughout Melville's subsequent work.

The metaphor of the problematic means of interpreting the baffling doubloon is perhaps the best starting point for a discussion of epistemology in Moby-Dick since it illustrates with respect to a reasonably mundane event the degree to which interpretation can be said to contaminate all which preoccupies what could provisionally be defined as "consciousness".

With Pip's conjugation of the verb "to look" (545) the appearance of a seemingly simple coin is transformed into an evocation of the predicament of human experience, a predicament informed by universal indeterminacy. The doubloon, in its status as the puzzle which is external to a human agent and beyond his or her control, is forever receding in the presence of a consciousness ill-equipped to circumvent or transcend its own isolation. As a consequence the doubloon (and by implication virtually all events in the external world) is portrayed as so amorphous in its constitution that one's limited experience of it is equally amorphous, generating an ever-shifting epistemological landscape within which the very notion of consensus is reduced to meaninglessness. The mind, though perhaps continuous, is suspended or frozen while all that it surveys undergoes ceaseless evaporation.

It is this absence of a sure connection between consciousness and its object of attention that Pip's cryptic remark targets most powerfully. In this regard it is interesting to note that Pip selects the verb "to look" rather than "to see". The distinction between the two clarifies the nature of the incipient epistemology at work throughout the novel. Looking emphasizes the subjective interior, the view of the world from behind the eyeball. Underlying Pip's focus on looking is the awareness that looking is carried out largely as a function of

consciousness and its relation to sensation. It is the purely subjective or conscious component of visual examination taken independently of its object. Looking does not in itself imply that there is necessarily something to look at. It is merely the focus or stance (and a prismatic one at that) of attentionality. It is pure visual performance.

Seeing, however, implicitly alludes to that which is seen. Thus it incorporates looking (since one must first look in order to see) and connecting with something capable of being recognized or noticed adequately enough to have its presence acknowledged. Seeing hints at a palpable, external world. Since Melville's epistemology is even at this stage already concerned primarily with the problematic aspects of epistemological and ontological stabililty, it is no surprise that looking has been severed from seeing just as the conscious human agent's interpretation has effectively been severed from knowing. To make matters worse the Melvillean sense of "looking" and what it implies about the drastic limits of understanding suggest that every instance of carrying out an act of interpretation is indistinguishable from an act of arbitrariness or preference. With the doubloon of the external world encouraging any and all speculations, the ensuing sense of pervasive indeterminacy makes it impossible to know when any given act of interpretation is in fact correct or merely a

reflection of what a conscious agent wishes or is disposed to see. Thus the doubloon raises the question of how to evaluate the unseen thoughts and intentions of another, a sub-theme whose articulation in later works by Melville achieves an alarming prominence as epistemological safety comes to rest increasingly on matters of human agency as opposed to the mere givenness of external objects.

With the significance of the doubloon resonating at the center of an epistemology of precariousness it seems quite fitting that it should be linked to the white whale by virtue of its reputation for being "the white whale's talisman" (541), an unobtrusive marker or signal pointing to a more extensive but unseen danger. The association here of the two is really one of a shared indeterminacy. The very fact that the coin is subject to as many plausible interpretations as there are observers suggests that its true nature (and here it is emblematic of the entire external world) cannot be delineated beyond the most primitive of categories, that of a mere impression. It is here that the foundations of David Hume's epistemology are especially evident:

> All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I call impressions and ideas...Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name `impressions'; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By

> `ideas' I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning;...(Hume 1)

For Hume all experience begins with those "impressions" associated with sensation. On the basis of these we acquire corresponding "ideas" and all subsequent reasoning is constructed upon the foundation of the extremely limited purview of these ideas directly connected to the bluntness and constricting haziness of sensation. The further reasoning gets from an immediate instance of experiencing an impression the less reliable it becomes. This suggests not only that reasoning can easily become detached from the actual nature of the external world (as seen in the numerous interpretations of the doubloon) but more importantly there is greater danger adhering to the limitations of impressions themselves. Hume's impressions are so elemental and vague that within their own domain they do not permit one to gain access to any reliable aspect of a thing in itself. Instead one experiences impressions of a surface mature, impressions conveying nothing about substance, body and temporal or spatial relations. The impressions we have are, in the final analysis, possibly merely our own (although this is also ambiguous) or they may have considerably more to do with the problematic gap between consciousness and the world than with anything specific which can be located external to an observer. The far-reaching consequence of much of Hume's work is to place the reasoning which is most cherished into a state of jeopardy and it would appear that even in this

first phase of his epistemology Melville is doing very much the same thing. This is perhaps most forcefully conveyed in a passage from Pierre.

> But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them: and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike. (195).

In this geographical analogy for the entire spirit of inquiry the mind is viewed as a compass in search of the polar or Arctic locale of truth, the actual nature of the existing state of affairs. However, Melville portrays thought and speculation as a process doomed to arrive at a magnetic dead end, a blank and featureless region within which the compass is subsequently attracted in all directions equally, suggesting the existence of an essentially Humean landscape within which the sheer givenness of things is so immersed in the mysterium that it has no recognizable, solid nature of its own. In the Arctic imagery here there is indeed the slightest hint of the "colorless, all color white" of Moby-Dick's whale. Like the doubloon the mind's compass is a signal or "talisman" of a barely discernible danger. Beyond a certain point of contemplation the whiteness, threatening in its vast opacity, opens up into an infinity of interpretations, the same epistemological wilderness seen throughout Melville's

work. Just beyond the border of surface appearances the compass will implode. The threat here is a double one. On the one hand surfaces provide deceptive security. If one goes beyond surfaces, however, the threat worsens by suspending or paralyzing all powers of discrimination. Ambiguity, much like the symbol of the Arctic landscape, freezes all efforts to achieve safety.

Implicit in the doubloon's disquieting malleability is the possibility that anything functioning as an object of observation or contemplation can slide into an indeterminate haze. Where, however, does this stop? If concrete objects thought to reside in the world can disappear so easily, is the self, when subjected to the same scrutiny, any more stable? Melville's implied response, in line with that of Hume, is in the negative, a point John Irwin notes when suggesting that in approaching the doubloon "...the hieroglyphic subject confronts the hieroglyphic object"(288).

Irwin's interpretation of the hieroglyph as an unbreakable code is a significant one and its application to Hume's epistemology warrants attention. Like the Humean impression the indeterminate hieroglyph of the doubloon, the whale or even the self can neither be explained nor adequately located. Suspended somewhere between the equally problematic realms of the world and the mind, the hieroglyph is at best a frightening trigger, an "impression" beyond

entrapment. In this light the doubloon's contamination of the self is such that

> ...the self... is not in itself a thing, not an enduring substance, but rather a changing function of... radical fluctuations within any given opposition (reversal into the opposite)... wandering from one opposition to another, so that the meaning of any object, for example, the "doubloon" nailed to the mast, is indeterminate because indefinitely overdetermined. This sense of the self's inherent instability, of its ability... to become anything, precisely because in itself it is nothing, comes more and more to dominate Melville's thought. (Irwin 320)

This particular evocation of overriding instability is anticipated in Hume's chilling, theoretical dismissal of personhood.

> ...nor have we any idea of "self"... For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd?... It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable... consequently there is no such idea. (Hume 251-252)

Relying exclusively as he did on impressions relating to sensory activity Hume asserted that since no impressions can be found which indicate the presence of that which one calls a mind or a self, one is in no position to posit the existence of anything which is an agent of impression. Thus one can discuss possible streams of impressions but not address with any reliability the notion of who or what is experiencing them. On the Pequod, at the very inception of

Melville's inquiry, the long term consequences of this bind are already foreshadowed.

Returning to the doubloon it is now possible to see that in its status as an encrypted exemplar of the very nature of human experience, it corrodes in a Humean fashion whatever safety could be thought to adhere to impressions and ideas. In referring to it as "the white whale's talisman", Ishmael is moving it into the more palpably dangerous radius of the whale's whiteness, a deceptive blank whose oddly hazy surface, aside from matching the mind's Arctic compass, is impervious to sensation and reasoning alike. The doubloon is thus a "white" talisman in the sense that its tendency to elude scrutiny is directly at odds with the seemingly natural desires of a consciousness only allegedly stable, desires which seek out order and definition. Even here at the very beginning of our inquiry into Melville's epistemology indeterminacy is already accompanied by menace.

The most consistent indicator of the tenuous status allocated to knowing in Melville's work is the symbolic use of whiteness, a figure whose appearance is so frequent and regulated that it suggests cognition is inescapably at risk. Perhaps the most arresting evocation of this state of affairs is the discussion of the whiteness of the whale.

> ...in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a

> dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows - a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider...that all other earthly hues - every stately or lovely emblazoning - the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods;...all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects...with its own blank tinge - ...so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. (295-296).

The view of how whiteness operates within the domain of light is instructive. At first glance it appears to be "the visible absence of color", something not entirely present to the observer. However, one also knows that it is simultaneously the fused totality of all other colors, the zone within which every shade resides and from which it originates. Two things become apparent almost immediately. The first is that observation is confronted not only by conflicting evidence but more precisely by evidence of a contradictory nature. The question arises as to how one decides between equally compelling appearances which just happen to cancel each other out. Secondly white emerges as the unseen or hidden cause which has triggered the more visible range of mere consequences. This optical condition

is a striking and indeed sinister representation of what occurs in the broader haziness of human experience.

Beyond the range of the color spectrum Melville's "colorless\all-color" pervades both the external world and the realm of consciousness: "Seen rationally, as an object, the world is inaccessible..."(Feidelson 33). The mind, in attempting to cope with the limited evidence of its Humean impressions, is faced with an expanding contradictory nothing\anything dichotomy, the epistemological equivalent to Melville's optical puzzle. Either the thing one is observing does not exist at all or it does; and if the latter is the case the thing's precise nature is beyond examination because, as was seen with the doubloon, one's impressions are constituted in such a way as to negate the possibility of positing anything beyond vague surface appearances. Thus Horsford's view of this matter would seem to be the most reliable one.

> We cannot fail to recognize in this chapter Melville's representation of Hume's implications; the dialectic of the material moves inexorably to the probable conclusion: all we can know, finally, of all the baffling phenomena presented by some possibly objective world is sheer illusion...From this appalling angle Ishmael must deny the certain validity of any `argument from design'...(83)

The degree to which Ishmael's angle of approach is indeed "appalling" can be seen in the long term hazards of the application of such a rigorously chilling skepticism. With impressions viewed as so frustratingly amorphous the

more central aspects of thinking related to causation must eventually be jettisoned, leaving the mind effectively stranded in a wilderness of the inexplicable, a wilderness which harbors a palpable threat.

Paul Brodtkorb's view of this white threat, despite its different epistemological foundations, highlights difficulties not altogether foreign to Hume's perspective. Brodtkorb, for example, stresses that the whale is in fact so "exceptionally white... so full of contrariety that it is not manageable under the aspect of causality"(144). When this is linked to the further observation that the whale "cannot be structured sensationally"(144) one is compelled to conclude that the validity of both reason and sensation (impressions) are subject to subversion. The question following upon these assertions is that of where to draw the line with respect to such subversion. For Brodtkorb existence itself does not appear to be threatened but his analysis nonetheless permits something of a Humean extension.

If both reason and sensation are indeed so occluded how could one claim to know what has triggered a so called experience? Is it anything at all? In such a haze how would one distinguish "me" from "it" without losing both? Thus, despite his differing critical aims, Brodtkorb engages himself with the material in a manner allowing for a Humean

application once some of his arguments are permitted to run their course.

A clearer evocation of this epistemological threat can be seen in a passage from Pierre which strongly resembles the account of the whale's whiteness.

> We see the cloud, and feel its bolt; but meteorology only idly essays a critical scrutiny as to how that cloud became charged, and how this bolt so stuns. The metaphysical writers confess, that the most impressive, sudden, and overwhelming event, as well as the minutest, is but the product of an infinite series of infinitely involved and untraceable foregoing occurences. (92)

Within this state of affairs every occurence of an event is reduced to the level of an unexpected accident and we encounter within the external world the equivalent to preference within thought. Just as reasoning cannot be sufficiently attached to its object in order to establish the validity of its interpretation beyond the status of preference or personal disposition, one's impressions or sensations of an external object cannot be adequately fleshed out to reveal the working physical components of anything. Melville's use of the image of a cloud here is apt. By its very nature the cloud conceals the source of its operation. The hidden, by virtue of its invisibility, is dangerous enough to kill.

In its capacity for infinite possibility, the whale's "colorless\all-color" is as lethal as the cloud's hidden charge since both obscure cause-effect relations. The lapse

into blindness associated with the observer of whiteness is yet another instance of the frustrating inadequacy of reason. The emerging Humean landscape is one in which disaster is not only unavoidable but also undetectable until after the fact. Safety, inseparable from the capacity to carry out an act of recognition, is beyond achievement.

With the doubloon and the whale's whiteness functioning to cast doubt on the efficacy of reason's capacity to achieve anything approximating knowledge, it comes as little surprise that the law, a vocation protrayed throughout Melville's work as possessing little merit, metaphorically fulfills the same role. In Moby-Dick the unreliability of legalistic thinking is exemplified best in the "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" chapter.

> They have provided a system which for terse comprehensiveness surpasses Justinian's Pandects and the By-laws of the Chinese Society for the Suppression of Meddling with other People's Business. Yes; these laws might be engraven on a Queen Anne's farthing, or the barb of a harpoon, and worn round the neck, so small are they.
> I. A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it.
> II. A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it. (505)

In what Ishmael refers to as the "terse comprehensiveness" of these whaling laws, two things are readily apparent. First of all the satirical manner of their presentation suggests that by their very nature laws and regulations are not worthy of being taken seriously.

Any law which could be inscribed on a coin while simultaneously claiming to have the capacity to justly settle an almost infinite number of conceivable disputes is, in the very least, symptomatic of dangerous arrogance. And yet it must be remembered, of course, that the law is traditionally regarded as one domain within which reason achieves some of its noblest potential. Ishmael's flippancy, in the light of this, appears to undermine the very disposition which seeks to enact and enforce such a faculty.

A second problem here relates to the consequences of the fact that the laws cited are not only out of date but extremely general and abbreviated, so much so that they are of minimal assistance in arbitrating disputes within a realm of experience held to be completely overladen with contingencies that are frequently unforeseeable. Thus experiences of the world prove to be convoluted while the laws designed to make them workable are simply ineffectual, demonstrating the disparity between the nature of actual events and reason which can be found throughout Melville's work. No congruency appears possible between the content of an actual whaling event and the reasonings of the law.

Melville's focus on the metaphorical aspects of the law certainly suggests that just as whaling is paradigmatic of the broader realm of "human experience", so too is the law's failure paradigmatic of the broader failures of reason in

general. The law, as Ishmael's tone indicates, is something of a joke evident even within the chapter's title. Although "fast" ostensibly indicates something which is "tied" while "loose" refers to that which is "disconnected", it is difficult to overlook the relation these terms bear to the expression "fast and loose", a means of suggesting that something is being carried out not only with a degree of spontaneity or blindness but even with recklessness.

Beyond this, however, it can also be seen that through humor the law is being associated with avarice, exemplified by a judge's decision to award a harpoon and line to a whale as a property right (507). The law is reduced to the level of the ludicrous by ineffective quibbling over the dominant concern for notions of property. In fact one could easily speculate that the law is viewed here as a mask for the orderly and palatable expression of selfish interests, seen in Ishmael's discussion of the law and its near pathological connection to all matters relevant to possession (507).

The far-reaching implication of this state of affairs is that reason not only fails to achieve any significant understanding, but also always operates with ulterior motives. The law, like all of reason, is an exploiter that simultaneously fails to engage itself with those things that really count, thus suggesting a Humean slant on reason. This seemingly surreptitious component of Melville's handling of the law in Moby-Dick is later extended with more

devastating consequences in "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Billy Budd. In the former a lawyer unable to comprehend the character of a mildly troubling employee eventually has him forcibly removed from sight in order to cope with his own cognitive limitations. In the latter Capt. Vere, in his capacity as a lawyer, suffers from precisely the same limitations and finally has Billy Budd executed in part to satisfy his need to adhere rigorously to military regulations even when it is clear that circumstance cannot adequately be explained within the context of a body of reasoned laws. What begins as an eerie joke in Moby-Dick is transformed into a killer by the time one reaches Billy Budd.

At this stage it might be wise to pause briefly over the "Etymology" and "Extracts" sections. Because they occur at the novel's beginning some readers would perhaps take them to represent a dazzling display of good breeding and extensive reading, in short a trustworthy example of what can be accomplished through a disciplined use of reason. However, I would suggest that these sections are best understood in retrospect where they acquire an entirely different resonance.

Perhaps the most significant detail to bear in mind is that these sections, despite appearing to function as something of a preface to the novel, are nonetheless fictively a part of Ishmael's overall narrative, a narrative

concerning itself in large part with the inefficacy of reason's effort to achieve knowledge. Considering how consistently Ishmael has been seen to adhere to this epistemological position thus far, his association with the "Etymology" and "Extracts" would tend to situate them precariously; it is here that I believe some readers miss the larger underlying point.

"Etymology", briefer and more straightfoward in its presentation, more readily illustrates in a metaphorical manner the problem which I wish to discuss. With the exception of the introductory paragraph dealing with the late consumptive usher, a paragraph to which I will return later, the bulk of this section can easily strike the reader as something to be found in almost any of numerous dictionaries of etymology. At first glance one has the impression that this studied scrutiny of the term "whale" will become encompassing enough to clarify our understanding of just what a whale is. However, the end result is conspiciously contrary to what an orderly and presumably systematic analysis is meant to accomplish. Instead the section appears implicitly to exemplify the now familiar cliché that a whale (or a rose) by any other name would remain as mysterious.

The ramifications of this are quite disquieting. On the one hand"Etymology" would appear to represent in an encrypted fashion not only an evocation of a Humean

condition but also that deconstructive bind which pervades Melville's language ever more progressively in The Confidence-Man and Billy Budd. Already there is the suggestion even in this earliest phase that a word is just a word, accomplishing nothing to improve its user's access to the nature of its alleged referent. There is a vague allusion to this predicament in the emphasis placed on Hackluyt's reference to "the signification of the word"(75), a linguistic shortcoming taken up later in the "Cetology" chapter when Ishmael characterizes whales in terms of books and chapters after having stressed that "I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty"(229). Ishmael's acknowledged incapacity to capture the nature of whaleness within a provisional system of "books" and "chapters" suggests the presence of an encrypted theory of language, a virtual whiteness of signification with the "Etymology" section serving as an early signal of the failure to come. Thus just as impressions fail to isolate the presence of an actual object or a conscious entity, language within Melville's epistemology exhibits the analogous Derridean predicament within which one can posit instances of dissemination without being able to locate a referent or a disseminating agent. Though not identical to Hume's stance this latter epistemological opacity is developed in tandem with the former.

More significantly, however, it can be seen that a situation of this nature is also entirely in line with the epistemology advocated by Ishmael elsewhere in the novel. Humean skepticism, trusting only in those impressions immediately engaging one's senses, relegates reasoning and its accompanying order to the domain of unverifiable belief and those dangerously impenetrable inclinations of human consciousness. Just as Ishmael's view of the doubloon, the whiteness of the whale and the law collectively serve to undermine belief in reason's capacity to delineate knowable order and consequently to achieve some degree of epistemological safety, Ishmael's early glance at etymology can be seen to operate in a similarly ironic manner.

The scholarly orderliness of "Etymology" is a deceptive and indeed subversive metaphor. Its surface meaning and its structural appearance actually demonstrate the emptiness and danger of all such reasoned exercises. The reference to the "late consumptive usher" (75) is surely a clue to this ironic strategy. The usher, now dead, is literally buried somewhere. However, it is possible for the reader to infer from the terms "pale" and "consumptive"(75) that in his state of being alive the usher's pallor was one which never saw the light of day. In effect he was already buried in advance of his death. This figurative burial or death seems to be associated with the nature of the usher's lexical activities. Like the burrower of the "Extracts" the usher

is a creature of darkness, compiling and ordering material which only leads one further from the mystery or "whaleness" at hand. His paleness in this sense is epistemological, the paleness of reason's consuming or consumptive futility.

The "Extracts" can be seen to function in a similar metaphorical vein. For some readers, however, the significance of this section resides in an examination of the internal dynamics of its component excerpts without due consideration to the larger theory of knowledge of which it is a constituent part. Frank Shuffelton, for exemple, sees within this chapter not only a basic outline of Moby-Dick"s ongoing plot (529-530) but also an historical survey of how"...attention [has been] increasingly directed first to the literal, material significance of the whale and of whaling and then to the symbolic possibilities of the same material" (535).

It is not my intention here to argue this particular reading since, like Shuffelton, I have no doubt that the "Extracts" was composed with method. From the perspective of epistemology, however, I believe this section achieves greater resonance by distancing oneself from its overt content and viewing it against the background of what Ishmael, its narrative source, persistently seeks to accomplish elsewhere in the novel. Having reached the end of the "Extracts" the reader gains no greater access to the whale's nature, its "whaleness". A bewildering though

vaguely orderly compendium of source material undoubtedly originating in antecedent efforts to achieve understanding has been somewhat reshuffled and presented in a manner which, despite its seeming cohesiveness, frustrates insight. As in the case of "Etymology" the whale here remains a mysterious something to which a barrage of inadequate words or signifiers has been attached.

Ishmael adopts a consistently Humean stance throughout Moby-Dick. Since he is at least technically responsible for the production of the "Extracts" it is important to determine what relation this section might bear to Humean epistemology. For Hume all discussion of order in the universe (and this includes the notion of existence) is strongly connected to reason's reliance on what are purported to be cause-effect relations. These relations in turn are posited quite tenuously on the basis of our use of elementary impressions of the senses, impressions which upon close scrutiny do not encourage one to place any degree of faith in the sort of reasoning which tends to wander quite far from the very isolated experience at hand (Hume 75-87). Order, in the final analysis, is simply beyond verification since every impression is experienced as disconnected from every other impression. Stability is a fiction one maintains as a result of inscrutable human inclinations and custom.

Bearing this in mind it is evident that this particular posture permeates Ishmael's account of the doubloon, the whale's whiteness and the operations of the law in the "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" chapter. When the "Extracts" section is moved into this sphere it begins to appear increasingly subversive. Its internal orderliness, what Shuffelton calls a shift from the literal to the symbolic, is not only the order of reason but an order that occludes the possibility for knowledge. The same can be said of the section's individual excerpts. None (each being presumably the product of someone's careful reflection) brings one any closer to the whale's or the mysterium's nature, the one matter which is most urgent here. "Extracts", much like "Etymology", is an ironic emblem or metaphor for the failure of reason. In this sense the section's possible meaning lies in its subversiveness in the context of Ishmael's overall Humean stance.

When we consider this, Ishmael's warning about the possibility of reading too much into the "Extracts", of mistaking them for "gospel cetology" (77) is credible. Although Shuffelton views this as unnecessary self-deprecation (529), in terms of Melville's clearly outlined epistemology the "Extracts", far from possessing any isolated or self-contained and lasting meaning, can only point toward a broader context of skepticism, one which holds claims relating to order in low esteem.

As in the case of "Etymology" the "Extracts" is attributed by Ishmael to a questionable figure, in this instance a "sub-sub-librarian" who is also a "burrower" (77). Like the pale consumptive usher this burrower compiles in a fashion that moves ever further from the object of his inquiry, suggesting perhaps that burrowing at sub-sub levels in what are presumably greater states of darkness is somewhat analogous to the questionable and indeed dangerous operations of thought.

Consistent with the view that knowledge is unachievable, especially through the exercise of reason, is the particular constitution of Ahab's character and its close association with the disasters of relying on reason. Perhaps the most prominent signal that Ahab's epistemological foundations are inherently unsound is his willingness to pause before the doubloon in the belief that the true nature of its inscription is accessible to him.

> But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon, he seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it, as though now for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk in them. (540)

Here Ahab is described in a manner indistinguishable from the other crewmen implicated in Pip's conjugation of the verb "to look", a pivotal situation noted by Howard Horsford (80). Thus like the others (but not Pip and Ishmael) Ahab at least implicitly believes in the efficacy

of what Horsford calls "symbolic interpretation" (73). Insofar as he actively participates in this sort of behavior he must be characterized as a disciple of reason. This is a vital piece of evidence relating to Melville's epistemology since a principal difficulty with Moby-Dick is that of determining who precisely is more disposed in this fashion, Ahab or Ishmael, and which stance represents the more Melvillean position from the critical perspective of this thesis. It is important to recall here that Ahab's approach to the world is that which has already been shown to be least effective in dealing with the kind of predicaments depicted within the metaphors and symbols discussed earlier. Like the premises operating within all evocations of rationalism (even the law) Ahab's premises, particularly the assumption that external events are in fact comprehensible, doom his intellectual efforts to miss their mark, so much so that his guiding vision of things destroys the Pequod and all of its crew except Ishmael, the one man possessing a radically different perspective. In this context Ahab emerges as an early avatar of the kind of character unable to carry out an act of definition, an epistemological predicament whose persistence illuminates the Melvillean landscape so characteristically that in later works its presence seeps downward to pervade even the most trivial events of everyday life.

The dim view of reasoning in the novel is extended beyond this point, however, by situating reasoning in close proximity to the peculiar nature of Ahab's madness.

> But, as in his narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab's broad madness had been left behind; so in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished. That before living agent, now became the living instrument...so that far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object.(284)

Despite the surface evidence which might encourage a reader to conclude that Ahab is an anti-rationalist as Charles Feidelson does (28) or that his condition is inseparable from a psychotic fixation originating in a desire for revenge and the sort of emotional instability which fosters arrogance, I would suggest nonetheless that he qualifies even here as an exponent of reason. Despite the presence of terms such as "madness" and "monomania" it is clear that Ahab, as this passage indicates, now utilizes his faculty of reason to find access to some hidden order. The fact that no one else is able to confirm the nature of this order is hardly surprising since everyone examining the doubloon is in precisely the same position. This leads one to conclude that it would be absurd to write off the epistemological predicament of the Pequod's crew as an instance of mass psychosis. Instead the implication here would appear to be that Ahab's madness is structurally

identical to the inclination to place a high degree of faith in personal interpretation or the ultimate validity of strategic thinking.

With this in mind Ahab's raving is of marginal interest. His intellect, having now evidently reached greater levels of acuity, functions hermetically, but so does everyone else's within the novel's broader Humean state of affairs. Ishmael and Pip, clearly the novel's two non-rationalists, are at least aware of this limitation, which serves as a clue to the possibility that Ahab's so-called madness may be functioning here as a metaphor for the unexamined reliance on reason, for confidence. Ahab, after all, has beliefs constructed on the basis of what he thinks and observes. How does this differ in the long run from the rationalist's position that reason ought to be trusted? How does it differ in structure and outcome from the operations of something like the law?

For Melville Ahab's raving is the raving of reason's advocates, a raving which alleges that things are constituted in one way rather than another and that we can actually claim to know just what that particular pattern entails. Thus it seems entirely fitting that Ahab is said to have been overtaken by an "incurable idea"(285). Ideas, originating for Melville as they do in the dangerous haze of a consciousness whose existence and structure cannot be contemplated, are the instigators of a malaise which is

indeed "incurable". Thinking and then trusting that thinking to the point of dogmatism are lethal in their capacity to weaken vigilance, to inspire the arrogance of what claims to be an informed faith within a world seemingly poised to snuff out whatever or whoever is unprepared to run for cover. Thus Ahab in particular has collided with what Feidelson views as the paradox of water-gazing, "a search for absolute unity with the objects of thought only to discover that immediate knowledge destroys the thinker"(29). In a Humean context Ahab's "immediate knowledge" is actually inference drawn from surface appearance.

Already it is possible to see in this early association of reason with lunacy what will later emerge in The Confidence-Man and Billy Budd as a near universal state of affairs within which the convolutedness and opacity of human intention are portrayed as indistinguishable from the threat of psychopathy. Ahab's seemingly exceptional raving is thus something of a trial run for the subtler workings of consciousness within the figures of the confidence man, Claggart and even Capt. Vere, whose adherence to a reasoned notion of order is pathological enough to kill Billy Budd. Reason's dangers, as Melville presents them, are twofold. It never leads to anything stable enough to be called knowledge and its own operations are so concealed that they pose a threat to whatever or whomever they touch.

Just as Ahab's nature can be said to exemplify many of the dangers inhering in that tendency to situate the unexamined trust in the efficacy of reason at the very center of one's epistemology, Ishmael is a virtual paragon of the necessity of maintaining a stance of radical Humean skepticism. As Moby-Dick's presiding narrative controller he is fictively responsible for the existence of that structural matrix I have examined whose resonance suggests in a rather encrypted fashion that beyond the level of amorphous impressions the human agent is stranded in a zone of epistemological and ontological bewilderment. However, if Ishmael is studied at closer range some of the wider but concealed ramifications of this epistemology emerge. A good starting point for such an inquiry is the matter of his name.

Ishmael's status as an outcast figure bears a connection to Humean epistemology. Beyond his role as the Pequod's sole survivor, his Biblically allusive stigma as a non-member of the human community is a subtle reminder that this non-membership is in part the product of an epistemology which precludes a comfortable belief in the likely existence of that very community. The thinker trapped in the Humean predicament is so much an outsider that even the notion of a self is foreign to him. Thus Ishmael is a wanderer in a landscape devoid of definition or certainty. The fact that he survives the sinking, however,

is surely an indication that the outcast or alienated epistemology he represents is, unlike the orderly vision of Ahab, as close to the actual state of affairs as one can get, further evidence that the epistemology dominating the novel is in fact that of Hume.

The significance of Ishmael's name is suggested by Melville's apparent decision to invoke the figure of Ishmael in at least four of the late works. In "The Two Temples", for example, a man locked after hours in an empty church is forced prior to being arrested to contemplate helplessly the figures of a Madonna and Child inscribed on a stained glass window, figures which slowly become for him symbols of Hagar and Ishmael (156). The fact that this man is a divine hostage unable to escape from the house of God is hardly a matter to be overlooked, particularly since this predicament recurs whenever a character of that name reappears.

In The Confidence-Man the skeptical Pitch, the one character able to minimize the damage inflicted by God's psychopathic agent, is accused by this agent in a state of exasperation of being "an Ishmael" (120). Hurled virtually as a term of disparagement, the name Ishmael in this context appears to function as God's predestined ad hominem proposition, suggesting that there is enough malice within God to warrant the very skepticism which is subjected to abuse.

Finally Pierre Glendinning is also characterized as an Ishmael (115-116) by the narrator of Pierre within a set of circumstances which the reader knows to have been set into motion by what the narrator ambiguously refers to as Pierre's "sainted father in heaven" (94). Vaguely suggesting the determining presence of fate, Pierre's status as an Ishmael appears to be linked inextricably not only to the past activities of his earthly father but also (through ironic suggestion) to the influence of a heavenly father more than willing to permit a well-intentioned man to be destroyed by contingencies eluding his merely human powers of understanding. Once again the appearance of an Ishmael figure has triggered the predictable appearance of a threatening deity.

If we now return to Moby-Dick I believe the Ishmael of that novel can also be seen as a subtle indicator of an emerging concept of God which Melville will develop throughout his later work while simultaneously evolving an epistemology normally antithetical to any notion of a higher power. Both will emerge in tandem and, despite the paradox, Melville's God will be shown to be oddly suited to the hazardous epistemology pervading the universe that He, She or It created.

Within this context Ishmael's status as an evocation of a Biblical figure is ominous, darkly suggesting a possible causal connection between the Biblical domain or the word of

God and the catastrophic nature of the limits inhering in human experience. The Biblical Ishmael, it must be remembered, was effectively banished to a desert, presumably one created by God (Wright 47-48). The relevance of this desert to Melville's Ishmael is hardly marginal. The epistemology for which he is principally responsible is one which portrays human consciousness as marooned or "outcast" within what could only be called an ontological desert or wilderness, a no-man's-land whose aridity is symptomatic of the absence of safety or knowledge. Thus in Ishmael's desert ancestry it is possible to recognize the close association of theism and Humean epistemology, an early compression of a more articulated unity to be seen later in The Confidence-Man and even Billy Budd.

The desert, however, continues to raise questions whose larger shape can be seen more clearly in a passage from Pierre.

> In the midst of the merriments of the mutations of Time, Pierre hath ringed himself in with the grief of Eternity. Pierre is a peak inflexible in the heart of Time, as the isle-peak, Pico, stands unassaultable in the midst of waves. (343)

At first glance this passage seems quite odd, at once critical and yet strangely approving. On the one hand all which the individual has are the "mutations of time" and their accompanying epistemological ambiguities. In such an impoverished climate it would seem advisable to seize the moment and enjoy whatever small blessings come one's way.

From this perspective Pierre clearly has been deficient, having ignored existential occurrence or, more precisely, the here and now, however nebulous. In a manner of speaking what little knowable existence he possesses has been supplanted by an undeviating vision.

However, there is also a paradoxical sense in which Pierre has drawn a bead on something universal and unchangeable. He is fixated in a manner not unlike Bartleby on "the grief of Eternity". This grief illuminates the larger condition or framework within which problematic human existence transpires seemingly beyond alteration. Having detected a foundational flaw, Pierre can no longer overlook it. What he sees beyond the moment is an image of blurred causality; thus his tragedy, at least in the epistemological sense, is also his peculiar salvation. His status as an "isle-peak...unassaultable in the midst of waves" is indistinguishable from the nature of his vision, a vision whose focus on the degree to which one is condemned to solitude and frustrated thought resurrects the presence of the Ishmael figure and its reliability as the possessor of what could be termed "inside information", so "inside" in fact that it situates him permanently outside.

In Melvillean terms it could be said that the Biblical Ishmael, insofar as he was fated to be consigned to desert banishment, was clearly the victim of a divine teleology, a wish on the part of God to guarantee a requisite level of

suffering for someone whose existence was deemed to be of such little significance that any question of what might be deserved could be overlooked. It is in the shadow of this desert predicament that Moby-Dick's Ishmael and Pierre weather the hazards of an outcast epistemology, an existence which also invites speculation about the nature of its origin. The implication, though never voiced, appears to be that an epistemological state of affairs characterized by such a high degree of uncertainty could only have come to pass if authorized by a God whose intentions toward humanity are something less than solicitous. Thus within the symbolic associations relating to Ishmael's name there is also an encrypted alliance between epistemology and teleology, between existential uncertainty or danger and divine purposiveness.

Returning for a moment to the passage quoted earlier on the subject of the whale's whiteness, Melville's use of the term "all-color of atheism" (296) now takes on a somewhat more baleful significance. Whiteness, it will be recalled, is not only a blank (the possibility for sheer nothingness) but it is also paradoxically the sum total of every wave-length of light merged with enough thoroughness to blur the component parts of the broad spectrum while creating a seemingly different whole. Thus whiteness is also the dense but invisible source of any conceivable type of potential light.

Beyond its optical applications whiteness is anything and nothing, a democratically constituted indeterminacy whose power to paralyze the mind is the source of a threat which pervades human existence only because it persists in being unseen. In this regard it is interesting that Ishmael would select the word "atheism" for non-belief or epistemological neutralilty. Whiteness, by virtue of its chameleon-like capacity to assume whatever significance the mind can conceive, suspends judgment because one cannot judge where all possibilities hold equal force. Belief is thus corroded but this corrosion has been associated fleetingly with God through the term "atheism", suggesting an almost reactionary rejection of a God whose existence is nonetheless intrusive. Of course one could say that the reflex action generated by a white epistemological and ontological predicament is simply that of a refusal to hazard any faith or belief in the secular sense, which is compared in structure and nature to atheism, the more specific religious equivalent to the same experience. The problem here is that religious paralysis is more properly characterized as agnosticism. Atheism, on the other hand, represents something of a claim to knowledge, an assertion that the subject of God's existence is sufficiently open to examination in order to confidently dismiss its validity. The atheist, like the believer, has no doubts.

Given what has already been seen of the connection between epistemology and teleology in the Melvillean world, a connection between the resonances of whiteness and a pervasive sense of menace, it is important to ask whether atheism can be viewed as a consistent part of this vision. The answer would appear to be in the negative; thus it is more likely that the conspicuous presence of the term "atheism" in the midst of a discussion of what amounts to a Humean wilderness represents an ironic invocation of a God whose nature is repellent enough to be worthy of the heresy implicit in his rejection.

As was noted with respect to Ishmael and his epistemology of the outcast, there is a strong suggestion here that the skepticism engendered by whiteness bears more than a passing relation to the unseen operation of an underlying theological agenda. It is not merely that reasoning about God invariably leads in the strict sense to a dead end in much the same manner as reasoning about the nature of events in the external world. Both are indeed very similar; but upon examining the role of Melville's concept of God in relation to his epistemology it becames clear that the ambiguities of the divine and secular worlds are seen to exist in a cause-effect relation such that epistemological doubt is the direct product of divine intent. Thus the passing reference to atheism is a brief glimpse at the considerably darker speculation to follow.

The shadowy association of God with the prevalence of whiteness is soundly established when Ishmael characterizes the color as "the very veil of the Christian's Deity" (295); and thus in retrospect it comes as no surprise to the reader that this particular association is the trigger of that motif of symbolic speculation which extends through virtually all of Melville's subsequent work, a motif which undermines notions of safety by invoking the paralyzing implications of epistemological whiteness in consistent and conspicously close proximity to ecclesiastical matters. Bearing in mind the degree to which Ishmael embodies this overall network of dangerous suspicion it is significant that he and other avatars of the Biblical Ishmael are among that small minority of Melvillean characters capable of carrying out acts of definition or understanding, however limited these may be. Ishmael's status as a survivor and outcast is thus implicitly held to be a mirror of whatever could be called "true". Unlike the Biblical Ishmael, however, the final vision bestowed on Melville's character as a mere crewman on the Pequod is analogous to what Bernard Lonergan once called an "inverse insight", that peculiar and teasing realization that no definitive insight could possibly be forthcoming.

Within the scope of this pincer movement between skepticism and dark theism the Melvillean wilderness is devoid of any sanctuary.

> Melville's underlying theme in Moby-Dick correlates the notions that the world was put together wrong and that God is to blame; that God in his infinite malice asserts a sovereign tyranny over man...(Thompson 242-243)

Ishmael is an icon of ontological and epistemological loneliness, a loneliness behind which one can detect the palest outline of a divine terrorism fostering what will grow into a relentless, suspicious squint.

In this light it can be concluded that even at this early stage of the first phase of Melville's epistemology, the fate of his inquiry is discernible in the nature of the doubt that is embodied in Moby-Dick.

> It is not new to point to Melville's life - long concern with the relation between knowledge and belief, but we need to explore more fully his imaginative rendering of the implications of such a relationship - and its collapse - if we are to understand better our response to his fiction. (Horsford 68)

For Horsford Moby-Dick is Ishmael's relentless assault on the false distinction between knowledge and belief, a point reiterated by John Irwin (346). This concern, a pivotal one for Melville, is also at the center of David Hume's epistemology. For Hume reasoning relies so heavily on the precarious nature of alleged causal relations that it carries us dangerously far from those initial impressions whose individual, disconnected occurrences are the only events to which anyone can claim to ascribe authenticity. The net result of this skepticism is to shift all claims to

knowledge into the unsafe terrain of reasoning where nothing rises beyond the status of an unverifiable belief. Thus for Horsford this epistemological posture is principally Humean, and it is my view that in the functioning of the structural pattern examined thus far one has already seen demonstrated the final epistemological evaporation that is characteristic of Hume.

As this analysis of Moby-Dick (admittedly a selective one) ends it is possible to recognize how issues of epistemology have been engaged through the invocation of the structural matrix discussed in my introduction and throughout this chapter. The epistemological position which emerges from this invocation is very similar in nature to that of David Hume. Thus what is encountered in Moby-Dick is a preliminary vision of corrosive doubt, one whose later avatars will not only utilize the same structural relationships but will also be similar in terms of their distant implications. What will change will merely be the increased scope of articulation.

P A R T T W O

"BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER"

Although the far-reaching implications of Melville's epistemology are readily apparent even within Moby-Dick, it is not until "Bartleby The Scrivener"(1853) that the chill factor of the first phase of this inquiry permeates the wider regions of a landscape whose features are rarely thought to reside in shadow. The arrival of the taciturn and oddly unsettling scrivener marks the introduction of an insidious and ineradicable paradigm of the twin riddles of identity and intent. The threat of ambiguity, though dexterously subtle, has finally seeped into the seemingly harmless transactions which characterize the everydayness of things. The result is a distillation of disorientation and dislocated menace, what Bruce Grenberg calls "Melville's reductio ad absurdum on the themes of human isolation and inconsequence in a world of random events and random encounters"(165).

Once again it will be noted that the subject of epistemology is engaged here through the invocation of the same kinds of figures comprising the structural matrix already viewed in Moby-Dick. Of special interest will be the sub-theme of preference and its relation to the indeterminacy of motives or intentions as well as an array of symbols which, when taken together, suggest that consciousness is stranded beyond retrieval in a zone of

Humean uncertainty. In addition there will also be some discussion of the operations of the law as a metaphor for the dangers of reason and a further examination of the two most ubiquitous types of character in Melville's later work, the character unable to make sense of his surroundings and the character whose inner nature is permanently beyond scrutiny.

Considering the story's intimate relation to the walls that veil human identity, it seems entirely fitting that its subtitle is "A Story Of Wall Street". In this pun one encounters not only a concealed attack upon the limitations inhering in those who thrive on the "business" of Wall Street, but also a darker allusion to the wider state of affairs characterizing any effort on the part of human consciousness to engage itself with the external world. Melville's epistemology, as seen even in Moby-Dick, is one which is plagued by the drastic consequences of an unbearably walled perspective on both the internal and external worlds.

With this in mind the lawyer-narrator is seen to be the typical, unknowing resident of the Wall Street of human existence.

> Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best...All who know me, consider me an eminently "safe" man. The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing

> my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method.(40)

The lawyer's ostensible virtues cited by John Jacob Astor are as safe as his business set-up. His life pursues what is "easiest", even within the narrow domain of legal transactions where, as the reader discovers, nothing he does rises above the level of fiscal superficiality. However, within the broader symbolic context of "Wall" Street, the lawyer's life is such that he never tests the solidity of the walls surrounding him. There is not even a hint within his character of an interest in the possibility or impossibility of transcendence. His veneer of safety extends far beyond the cultivation of an external life heavily characterized by predictabililty. Inwardly the pervasiveness of the lawyer's tendencies toward safety and ease has effectively precluded questions of an unsafe nature and their likely responses. Thus the survival of his "grand points" is seen to be dependent upon his continued state of ignorance and there is surely a suggestion here that his overall disposition is an evocation of a predicament central to Melville's epistemology, that of the character who persistently fails to carry out acts of understanding in circumstances whose level of threat rises as vigilance is eroded. Like the Pequod's crewmen who settled dangerously for an unexamined analysis of the doubloon, the lawyer is something less than insightful.

The passage above, however, yields considerably more veiled information about the nature of the lawyer's character. The first item of interest is the wider implication of his self-conscious use of the term "safe". In the precariousness of the Humean scheme of things claims to safety are symptomatic of a range of consciousness bordering on that of a coma. Thus on the basis of what is already known of Melville's epistemology the lawyer's belief in the efficacy of "safe" living is heavily ironic and this clearly subverts his credibility as an observer.

Subversion of the lawyer's stature is extended upon consideration of his close association with the limited perspective of the metaphor of the law. In Moby-Dick the law's inadequate reasoning was portrayed as something of a joke. Here, however, the consequences of reason's failure are far more sinister. From his own self-evaluation it is evident that the lawyer's vision of the world is effectively indistinguishable from the underpinnings of the law. Like all practitioners of his profession he believes in the application of reason, so much so that he directs it unendingly toward the achievement of an "easy" and "safe" life. Underlying this reliance on reason, however, is the further belief that the world is an orderly place and this order will somehow reveal itself if reason is adhered to rigorously enough. The longterm goal is to discover the unchanging system which governs outward circumstance, a

system which once understood can be formulated into concise dogma no longer requiring any revisions. The law, in its reliance on reasoned formulas permitted to legislate how lives can be lived or ended, clearly inhabits this sort of rarified landscape, and the lawyer's emphasis on his own "prudence" and "method" indicates that he does as well. The only problem here is that this constellation of characteristics fails to comprehend the phenomenon of Bartleby, and it fails so badly that it kills him.

In view of the dogmatic, non-speculative nature of the lawyer's legalistic reasoning, it is no surprise that the walls overlooking his office are appropriately polarized in color.

> At one end, they {the chambers} looked out upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky - light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom... {and} my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade;... (40-41)

The lawyer's view, both literally and figuratively, is consistent with a life never far removed from the complacency of a reasoned ease and safety. The insights generated from such a perspective are predictably of a symbolically black and white nature, possessing an endangering simplicity unable to grapple with ambiguity's insidious tendency to recede into the grey centre of things. Already it is quite evident that within Melville's epistemology at this point reason is being undermined from

two directions simultaneously. First of all the law is being portrayed once again as a metaphor for the futility of positing a true order corresponding to the way the mind happens to conceive of it and, secondly, this metaphor has been shifted into close proximity to the nature of a character whose consciousness is virtually guaranteed to arrive at cognitive dead-ends. The lawyer has become the instrument which ironically validates the pervasiveness of indeterminacy.

Bartleby's introduction to the reader, providing such a sharp contrast to the lawyer's "methodical" perspective, illustrates this move away from reason quite effectively.

> I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable...(39-40)

Imperv ous to reason even in the manner of his initial appearance on t..e scene, Bartleby is an essentially Humean phenomenon. Like the "impression" which seems suddenly to be apparent to the senses in the absence of any verifiable antecedent cause, Bartleby is an eruptive experience whose origin and nature remain undisclosed to normal scrutiny. Given Melville's adherence to a Humean position and the universality of such a predicament within this position, Bartleby emerges as a quintessential figure of experiential estrangement, a virtual epistemological chill which has intruded into the lawyer's delicately balanced world of

airless contentment. As Grenberg emphasizes, Bartleby stands "at the center of this shrunken, and still shrinking, indeterminate world..."(166). It is this state of discordant inexplicability which triggers the lawyer's reactive stance toward Bartleby.

Once Bartleby has acquired his position as a scrivener the lawyer, now predictably faithful to his nature, reinforces Bartleby's walls by walling him away within the already walled environment of the office.

> I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call,... Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined. (46)

Bartleby, like the true "impression" that haunts the Humean world, remains walled away from sight on the lawyer's side of the office but still within earshot. Thus the laywer's "arrangement" of Bartleby's working area is symptomatic not only of his own limited powers of understanding, powers directly related to the precarious artificiality of the law and its use of reason, but more importantly of that problematic indeterminacy at the heart of the Humean state of affairs. The lawyer speaks to Bartleby but cannot see him. This reflects not only his own choices and disposition but also the unalterable nature of human experience. Just as the lawyer represents the

character unable to carry out an act of understanding or definition, Bartleby emerges as an unsettling complementary figure, the character who is so fundamentally "other" that his nature eludes definition, residing somewhere within a potentially lethal haze.

With these epistemological limits firmly inhering in the very fabric of human experience, it is somewhat puzzling to discover that for some readers the mere presence of the color green upon a wall is enough to negate all that walls of various sorts symbolize on a consistent basis throughout Melville's work.

> Another important symbol in the story is the color green...Further, when the lawyer first hires Bartleby he senses that the young man is superior to the other scriveners, and feeling that he can grow to the business successfully the lawyer places Bartleby near him behind a green screen. (Browne 157)

It is difficult to see how the deliberate imposition of a green wall by a figure consistently portrayed in relation to the inadequacies of the law and reason could be viewed as an effort to encourage growth. The mind erecting the wall is governing the experiences endured by Bartleby during his tenure as a scrivener; in this light the wall's greenness emerges as something less than bucolic. The lawyer, it will be recalled, informs the reader quite early on that he enjoys reciting the name of John Jacob Astor because it reminds him of "bullion" (40). Thus, it would seem far more

likely that green is symbolic of the lawyer's greed and corporate interests, his desire for a little green currency.

Keeping this in mind it is already possible for the reader to detect the first hazy suggestion that Bartleby is not only the otherness of the external world but also a fundamental component of the self, one with a tendency to disrupt the self-satisfied environment of the baser instincts.

> The behavior of the lawyer gives stronger evidence that Bartleby is his psychological double. The screen which the lawyer places around Bartleby's desk...symbolizes the lawyer's compartmentalization of the unconscious forces which Bartleby represents. (Marcus 108)

Here psychology and epistemology briefly merge. On the one hand Bartleby is that one persistent note of doubt or fear which has been walled within walls in order to insure the continued enjoyment of an ever more insecure belief in the rightness of things, the judiciousness of particular personal choices. However, like a force of Nature Bartleby is also a vulcanism, a sudden unleashing of the normally well-buried suspicion that aloneness is inescapable. The lawyer, in restricting his contact with Bartleby to words rather than sight, is attempting to keep at bay an epistemological state of affairs as yet only glimpsed in the realm of vague intuition. As Grenberg suggests, "Bartleby represents all that the lawyer does not want to know about himself"(174), knowledge here being more a matter of

disquieting wonder. The manner in which he enforces this obstruction proves to be fatal.

At the core of this story, perhaps at the core of much of Melville's thinking, is Bartleby's ominous expression of preference.

> `I would prefer not to,' said he.
> I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. (47)

A number of inter-related questions central to Melville's epistemology impinge upon the manner in which the lawyer focusses on Bartleby's invocation of preference The first which comes to mind is the matter of surface appearance. Bartleby, the reader is told, is "dimly calm", without "a wrinkle of agitation", barely "ordinarily human" and in fact uncomfortably like a "plaster-of-paris bust". In his status as the paradigmatic phenomenon which eludes adequate definition he illustrates the degree to which any conscious observer is forced precariously to rely on the accessibility of surfaces, a situation already shown to be dangerous with respect to Moby-Dick's doubloon. Bartleby's stillness and conspicuous absence of recognizable expressions suggest that surfaces are themseleves unstable, perhaps utterly detached from any underlying, continuous

state of affairs which could be thought of as a nature or some sort of substantive identity. Much like the walls he contemplates Bartleby is a palpable blank, the very embodiment of a walled ontology. This bears a direct relation to Hume's concern for the notions of substance, body and identity.

For Hume human experience begins with impressions of a sensory nature, followed by the development of ideas that are a direct product of these impressions. The question then arises as to how one can account for ideas relating to substance. Since our initial impressions concern themselves exclusively with outward appearances, it would seem that any idea of substance could not be said to originate in any experience of an impression. Hume's conclusion is that the idea of substance derives instead from our own peculiar passions and emotions, both of which maintain very tenuous relations to what are more properly termed "impressions". Thus substance is a notion which originates from within a mind that can't be examined and it is subsequently ascribed to those objects which we believe to exist in the external world. This vulnerable line of reasoning leads Hume to state that "we have therefore no idea of substance" (16).

Body and identity undergo very much the same destruction within Humean epistemology. Because our ideas derive from impressions of what can only pass for alleged external appearances we cannot posit actual "bodies" or

objects in the world for to do so would necessitate making a claim that our impressions extend beyond that which has an effect on our senses. Since this is clearly out of the question for Hume the only ideas which carry any weight are those relating to so-called external properties and the manner in which these influence our senses (64). The entire question of the nature of an object, the question of its body or "object-ness" remains a mystery, and speculation adheres instead to the dangerous world of surfaces.

Identity, the more pivotal issue here, is equally beyond reach. In one's everyday experience it is quite natural to posit an ongoing existence for an object even when one is not present to examine it. Beyond this, however, it is also a habit to assume that when an object is steadily in view the stream of seemingly similar impressions one is experiencing serves to indicate that one continuous object is being observed rather that multiple similar ones. Lamentably our ideas (in the Humean sense) do not actually confirm this, since ideas can only operate within the purview of ambiguous outward properties and how these may trigger sensory experience. To posit the sort of continuity which amounts to an identity requires belief in what Hume terms a "necessary connection of cause and effect" (74), a connection which though frequently invoked cannot be subjected to verification. With this seemingly offhanded dismissal of identity Hume leaves the world blinking in and

out of existence on the basis of one's limited capacity to view and contemplate that which never ceases to be a mere ephemeral surface.

Keeping these various questions in mind it is now possible to recognize the extent to which the lawyer's difficulties with Bartleby in the passage cited above are fundamentally Humean in nature. Bartleby's oddly featureless stillness and the lawyer's subsequent disorientation are barometers of the degree to which questions of body, substance and especially identity have contaminated the stabililty of the law firm's day to day existence. Bartleby, in his evocation of the character whose resistance to definition is relentless, suggests by his mere stasis that the world may in fact be populated by nothing other than the individual observer's own idiosyncratic presumptions, his or her wish to see "something" rather than a vacuum. This question of who or what precisely can be said to exist outside any individual's consciousness and more importantly just what the nature of these existents may be are subjects which recur repeatedly in Melville's epistemology, with each recurrence more baleful. Thus the questions posed here continue to resonate such that their resistance to eradication eventually leads to a portrayal of ceaseless exploitation in The Confidence-Man and death in Billy Budd. That which cannot be known victimizes sooner or later.

Closer to the surface of everyday experience, however, are the disquieting implications of Bartleby's conspicuous invocations of the notion of preference. Like the sub-theme of accident this also has its roots in what is essentially a Humean state of affairs. In Moby-Dick it was seen that the impossibility of carrying out anything remotely approaching a definitive interpretation of the doubloon effectively reduced each view or "impression" of the coin to the status of an anomalous or accidental occurrence utterly detached from any verifiable antecedent cause. Events in the external world, once scrutinized, took on the appearances of random chance.

Preference in the case of Bartleby is barely distinguishable from outward accident and is in fact a more invisible and thus more disturbing variant of the same condition. Hidden as they are behind Bartleby's frozen features his preferences or intentions, even to the careful observer, emerge in a manner which seems somehow unattached to causality and thus they appear spontaneous and dangerous. Human agency, like an act of God, merely erupts. Preference becomes one more occasion for the unleashing of Humean disorder. The mind's haziness, appropriately suggested by Bartleby's grey eyes, is as impervious to analysis and as drastically alien as the external occurences represented by the doubloon. In this sense Bartleby is a conflation of the ambiguities that inhere in both the external and internal

realms. It is this state that generates the air of a world forever shifting out of focus.

> It is fitting that the coming of a writer like Bartleby is what makes us aware of another view, one neither black nor white, but a quite distinct third view which is now added to the topography of the Wall Street microcosm. (Marx 88)

The significance of Bartleby's writing aside, it is epistemologically noteworthy that when the lawyer scrutinizes Bartleby's features he sees nothing that is readable. Like the plaster bust of Cicero, Bartleby's face is blank, its underlying nature hidden from view behind grey eyes that subtly allude to a complexity beyond the simple black and white of the lawyer's own walls. The "third" view quietly taking up residence on Wall Street is that of the mysterium, the inexplicable. It is this steadily encroaching predicament that triggers within Melville's work the ongoing preoccupation with a dark chain of problematic characters extending from Capt. Ahab through Pierre Glendinning, Bartleby, the figure of the confidence-man, Billy Budd, Capt. Vere and Claggart. All in their fashion reside beyond human comprehension and are thus paradigmatic figures. As this chain progresses, however, these paradigms become increasingly threatening in their indeterminacy. In the case of Bartleby it is not so much the man himself who poses a threat as the underlying epistemological state of affairs of which he is an uncomfortable reminder. Already in this story is an implicit outline of a world whose

boundaries are determined by the instability and ultimate catastrophe of preference and accident, elemental and unavoidable characteristics of existence which effectively undermine any notion of safety.

The lawyer, despite his growing preoccupation with Bartleby, never fully understands Bartleby's pivotal relation to the significance of preference, nor can he appreciate the philosophical issue looming above it.

> It is not seldom the case that, when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind. (49)

In the brevity of his unease there is at best a fleeting visceral awareness of an unseen seismic shift in the topography of his worldview, a shift which is emblematic of a universal failure of epistemology. However, in a predictably lawyer-like fashion he clings to the very faculty which is guaranteed to bring about the highest degree of inaccuracy. Thus his experiences at the hands of Bartleby are characterized as "unreasonable", something of an anti-climactic joke when the reader pauses to consider that the prevailing Humean state of affairs is one which utterly precludes any possibility of positing the existence of an ordered universe accessible to the operations of

reason. As if to make matters worse the lawyer compounds his difficulties when he advocates seeking out the comfort of other "disinterested" and presumably rational persons. To accept this line of action it would have to be agreed that several muddled minds tripping over each other are surely more beneficial than one. It consequently comes as no surprise that the lawyer's "plainest faith", a synonym for his unexamined belief that the world is a knowable and indeed safe place, is only briefly shaken before being quickly shored up by all which the law metaphorically represents within Melville's epistemology. Reason, once invoked, can be manipulated to make almost anything palatable and, as will be seen in this story and later in Billy Budd, the law as an evocation of reason has an especially sinister capacity even for sanitizing complicity in another's death.

Notwithstanding what Ethel Cornwell aptly views as the lawyer's capacity to "master...self-deception"(94), the depth of the fissure which has appeared at least symbolically in his worldview is most clearly descernible in the undeviating nature of Bartleby's adherence to an inexplicable routine.

> `I would prefer not to'
> `You will not?'
> `I prefer not.'(52)

> ...he copied for me at the usual rate of four cents a folio (one hundred words); but he was permanently exempt from examining the work done by him,...[and] Bartleby was never, on

> any account, to be dispatched on the most trivial errand of any sort; and that if entreated to take upon him such a matter, it was generally understood that he would `prefer not to'---in other words, that he would refuse point-blank. (52-53)

In the first passage quoted above the brief exchange between the lawyer and Bartleby serves to highlight the diminishing value of the lawyer's reliance upon the efficacy of those judgments of probability derived from induction. Like the rationalist that he is, the lawyer emphasizes the verb "will" in the continuing belief that events can be planned and then predicted with some degree of certainty. Bartleby, consistent with Humean ambiguity, merely "prefers" and thus subverts the lawyer's effort to retain a minimal grasp on what can be expected of the immediate future. Preference not only focusses on the undisclosed origin of intentions but, more importantly, obfuscates any effort to entertain questions relating to continuity. Each instance of Bartleby's expression of preference draws attention to the fact that actions emerge seemingly out of a vacuum possessing no character of its own. What is preferred at one moment could very easily be contradicted at the next. In this light the lawyer's failure to get Bartleby to speak in terms of what he "will" or won't do is rather chilling. All of induction has evaporated in eleven words.

The second passage deepens this epistemological predicament. Bartleby's capacity to issue unrestrained, point-blank refusals in the absence of explanations and his

persistently mysterious resistance to the possibility of expanding his duties even marginally, denote in a somewhat cryptic form the extent to which one is unable, within Melville's epistemology, to successfully influence or even understand another human being. Character is elusive; and in Bartleby the lawyer, however unreflectively, has discovered a window overlooking a world of severed moorings. In his failure to move Bartleby he is being cut loose from rational connections which are unable to withstand the magnification of close examination. Like every consciousness he is being stranded ever so gradually in Bartleby's world of walls, existentially not only on the outside looking in but simultaneously trapped on the inside looking out. The walls on this particular street are ontological fixtures.

It is at this point in the story that Bartleby emerges more clearly not only as an evocation of the "other" but also as something of an everyman, a universal exemplification of the pained isolation and inscrutability of consciousness.

> ...what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of everyday it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of weekdays hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy...And here Bartleby makes his home;...
>
> For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught

> but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. (55)

Although the lawyer, like anyone possessing consciousness, is a necessary resident of Wall Street's unalterable matrix of existence, Bartleby is its truest denizen. Not only does his after-hours persistence in the area suggest permanent constraint but in addition the reader also knows that a great deal of Bartleby's time elapses in near-frozen contemplation of walls situated at extremely close range. The implication would certainly seem to be that Bartleby knows precisely where he is, a point he later stresses in the prison yard (71). The lawyer may drift through this minefield obliviously but Bartleby resides within its very ontological masonry. In this sense he exemplifies and makes manifest those qualities in which other minds participate in a less reflective fashion. In the Humean scheme consciousness is, by necessity, a full-time resident of a walled landscape whose reliance on nothing other than unstable impressions has erased the presence of other people and precluded the possibility of any safe epistemological exit route. Bartleby's after-hours isolation is thus the isolation and pain of consciousness marooned amidst its own flurry of activity with no means of communication with or verification of the outside world. The lawyer, in his identification with Bartleby, briefly detects this but, as in the case of his

earlier waning faith, quickly recovers from the hazards of looking too closely.

Bearing this in mind it is remarkable that some readers appear unable to avoid the tendency to view Bartleby through the opposite end of the telescope. Adopting the lens which coolly and reliably reduces everything within its visual range to the comforting size of a speck, such readers almost invariably invoke the elevated but tenuous authority of a range of social sciences seemingly created to locate all explanations for the constraints of the human condition solely within the will of humanity itself. Within this suspiciously self-serving scheme of things there are no problems in Nature; there are only problems in people. Or better yet, there are only problems in particular people. For such readers Wall Street is the object of cherished dreams. It is the home of a soothingly indestructible, economic edifice forever on the side of virtue where money, we are all expected to know, is made the old-fashioned way. For a reader of this disposition Wall Street really has only one problem, and the problem's name is Bartleby.

> Then why has Bartleby allowed the wall to paralyze him? The others in the office are not disturbed by the walls; in spite of the poor light they are able to do their work. Is it possible that Bartleby's suffering is, to some extent, self-inflicted?...For Bartleby has come to regard the walls as permanent, immovable parts of the structure of things, comparable to man's inability to surmount the limitations of his sense perceptions...He has forgotten...that these particular walls which surround the office

> are, after all, man-made. They are products of society, but he has imputed eternality to them...in his disturbed mind...(Marx 98)

What follows here may at first glance appear to be an unnecessary digression on what some would insist is merely one scholar's reading of Melville. However, the reading in question is typical of a pervasive and prolonged tradition of side-stepping the messiness of Melvillean epistemology and thus occluding the deeper registers of Melville's thought. Instead within this tradition Melville is drafted into some pantheon of conservatism where the lawyer's perspective of epistemological faith can be enshrined despite the presence of a substantive body of conflicting textual evidence from the story itself and the further consistency of Melville's inquiry throughout his later fiction. For these reasons alone Leo Marx's views are worthy of close attention.

In his highly conspicuous effort to shrink epistemology into the strictures of abnormal psychology, Marx has jettisoned some of the most basic and self-evident principles of formal logic. The reader is told, for instance, that Bartleby is the only employee in the office for whom the walls pose a problem. Marx would apparently have one believe that since Bartleby is statistically outnumbered by three to one, the problem must undoubtedly reside within him more than it does within the condition which the office symbolically represents. This, however,

does not follow. Notwithstanding the sanctity of democracy and statistics, the evidence of the story indicates quite strongly that Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut are likeable but unreflective characters. Thus they work quite well in what Marx calls "poor light" because, in fact, they are unenlightened. Bartleby may indeed be outnumbered here but the critical tendency to permit this to justify the application of the term "disturbed" to his overall character is uncomfortably reminiscent of that stance which finds similar justifications for the enforcement of political intolerance.

Marx's view of the man-made nature of Bartleby's walls exhibits the same peculiar lapse in reasoning. No one would contest at least for the sake of discussion the provisional validity of the observation that Bartleby exists within a community of other human beings and that this community has evolved particular social and economic structures which limit, by their very imperfection, the mobility of that community's members. However, Marx conveniently looks no further. It is as if he believed that social conditions spring up miraculously without causes which precede human intervention. It is his refusal to probe (much like the lawyer) which invites an epistemological analysis.

Once again the problem here is one of logic. Social structures can only evolve subsequent to the existence of an appropriate level of consciousness. In other words the

society which humans are said to `create' is a product of the mind which they already have and which they have not created. Surely Melville's entire epistemology is tilted implicitly toward the ramifications of this observation. Bartleby's walls are the epistemological locks which insure suffering without cessation, blank reminders of an intrusive and vaguely sinister first cause. In the light of this the consciousness permeating social existence is so intrinsically and hopelessly flawed that no amount of self-delusion can vote its defects out of office. For Marx the discomfort of having to situate Bartleby within a virtual teleology of cognitive failure appears to have been supplanted by the preferable suggestion that Bartleby, as almost any psychologist or sociologist could be relied upon to state with tiresome predictability, is just another "disturbed" case, a man in drastic need of a good pharmacist.

This admittedly protracted analysis of Marx's critical stance demonstrates and clarifies the degree to which both he and the lawyer converge in their reliance upon epistemological blindness, a belief in the ultimate efficacy of leaving oneself vulnerable to the threat of unexamined assumptions in exchange for the illusion of safety. This position quite simply flies in the face of Melville's overall epistemology, a state of affairs within which a contemplation of the walls of ontology is the highest

achievement of consciousness. Thus the lawyer's emphasis on Bartleby's "incurable disorder" (56) meets with an equally questionable and facile diagnosis in Marx's use of the term "disturbed". What both reflect is the overwhelming attraction of complacency. Bartleby's "disorder", however, derives from what Dan McCall suggests is "seeing the world... for the monstrous place it is"(51). Given the absence of certainty, Bartleby mirrors the possibility for persistent suspicion.

It comes as little surprise that in resolving that Bartleby should leave the office because of the hopelessness of his situation the lawyer, aware of it or not, has collided with his own frustrating, cognitive limits.

> Too sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but...his soul I could not reach. (56)

True to form the lawyer has very dexterously invoked the more palatable connotations of "common sense" as a means of consolidating his continued reliance on reason while simultaneously distancing himself from the potentially messy responsibility to be incurred once Bartleby has been deliberately jettisoned beyond saving. In his inability to reach another soul one can recognize that it is not merely pain for Bartleby which brings about the lawyer's decision; there is also pain for himself and a rather sly awareness or

decision that what can't be helped can presumably be eased out of sight. Even his incipient suspicion that the nature of things is fundamentally unknowable can be gently buried. In this sense the lawyer bears a remarkable resemblance to Capt. Delano of "Benito Cereno". Both men possess an unsettling talent for what turns out to be a self-serving revisionism. Thus for the lawyer there remains very close at hand a capacity to summon up a secure belief that Bartleby is an anomaly.

However, as Bartleby lingers on the premises his presence does take a further, corrosive toll upon the lawyer.

> `Mr. Nippers,' said I, `I'd prefer that you withdraw for the present.'
>
> Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word `prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? (58)

In his discovery that he has begun to use the term "prefer" the lawyer is tacitly identifying with the epistemological condition which Bartleby represents. Bartleby's essentially inexplicable nature here has shifted unobtrusively into the lawyer's terrain. Bartleby is the dark subject or agent at work in the lawyer whose outline can barely be discerned. Thus consciousness not only fails to comprehend the outer world and other people but it also fails to recognize its own proportions. The component

within consciousness which exercises the ambiguous capacity to "prefer" or to be arbitrary is hidden from its own coiled reflectiveness. The lawyer's hazy impression of this is demonstrated in his fear of what could follow. The unpredictability of preference could give way to a broader range of unseen disorder, a Humean nightmare.

Though not fully aware of all of the ramifications of his identification with Bartleby, the lawyer nevertheless responds in a manner suggesting that he at least suspects how terrifying this situation can rapidly become. Both Turkey and Nippers are suddenly seen to be using the same disturbing term "prefer" (58-59). The lawyer's attention, at least for a time, can no longer overlook the pervasive presence of the inexplicable or the seemingly accidental as conveyed through preference. His world, comfortably ensconced between black and white walls, is now inundated by disorder. To the extent that the pivotal significance of preference is effectively unleashed as a direct result of Bartleby's proximity, Bartleby's status as an exemplar of the character whose nature eludes any sort of stable definition is enhanced by the fact that in this particular context he is both a contaminant and a bearer of problematic light. Bartleby is a figure who undermines the comforts of an assumed safety by replacing them with a vision of indeterminacy which, though accurate, never stops moving long enough to be grasped.

It is this bizarre state of affairs which leads the lawyer, when scrutinizing Bartleby, to observe cryptically that "...I never feel so private as when you [Bartleby] are here" (65). At this point Bartleby's roles as the "other" and the self, the intruder who is also the only real insider, coincide or merge perfectly. The lawyer is most private with Bartleby because in the prevailing Humean scheme Bartleby is privacy incarnate. When he is near the lawyer is in closest contact with the essential nature of his own consciousness. Thus he and Bartleby, in Michael Paul Rogin's words,"...are two halves of a single, divided self" (198). In terms of Humean epistemology the lawyer is most fully himself in the company of Bartleby because each inhabits a necessarily walled and isolated consciousness.

Despite this seeming acknowledgment of closeness the lawyer in McCall's words, "keeps coming back, asking the irrational to be reasonable, trying to get the refractory to cooperate"(145). It is this attitude which permits him to be persuaded by his other associates on Wall Street to be rid of Bartleby with finality.

> I believe that this wise and blessed frame of mind would have continued with me, had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends who visited the rooms. But thus it often is, that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous... At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to

> the strange creature I kept at my office. (65)

However, from the wording of his account of these events it would seem just as likely that the insidious "whisper of wonder" that spreads unseen through Wall Street is in fact an internal convulsion, a gesture of rebellion on the part of those "professional" and rational faculties within the lawyer which largely determine his relations with the rest of the world. Bartleby has approached to within an unpredictably close range, triggering the reactionary opposition of those "friendly" elements which typify the familiarity and the comfortable posture of the lawyer's formerly oblivious life. Thus in Bartleby and the lawyer's so-called "friends" the reader has encountered the two principal forces warring for the lawyer's epistemological loyalty. In his persistent refusal to leave the office Bartleby is the catalyst in a fatal battle of wits over inquiry and its suppression.

Notwithstanding the authenticity of the lawyer's disorientation it remains the case that his epistemological perspective, inseparable from his attachment to the law and its relation to reason, never deviates from the terrain of an unexamined belief in the actual existence of order. Among the clearest indicators of this is his self-satisfied account of how a reliance on assumptions can obviate the messiness of confrontation.

> Without loudly bidding Bartleby depart--as an inferior genius might have done--I `assumed' the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say. The more I thought over my procedure, the more I was charmed with it. (61)

The lawyer's plan of action in maneuvering Bartleby out of his immediate vicinity and beyond the point from which he can continue to pose a threat is based on a dangerous reliance on the assumptions generated by a so-called "genius" - like use of reason. Upon reflection this rather arrogant posture proves to be quite similar to that of the judiciary which not only seeks to articulate a reasoned and definitive account of the relations which ought to prevail among beings whose natures are assumed to be transparent, but also invokes the right to take reprisals whenever events in the world fail to conform to the dictates of this body of thought. Thus when Bartleby fails to accede to the validity of the lawyer's assumptions the scrivener emerges once again as a figure whose very being typifies an entirely different set of epistemological relations, one in which reason can no longer be invoked as a means of sanitizing one's desire to erase disorder. The lawyer,true to the nature of his fiscal and legal heroes, is left genuinely puzzled by the thought that the cosmos has evidently exercised the very bad taste to allow its operations to defy the will and genius of an acquaintance of John Jacob Astor. The stakes here are high. As Grenberg writes

> ...the mild ease with which Bartleby rejects his [the lawyer's] world and everyone in it reveals how few and how slender are the threads that hold it together. This is the challenge the lawyer must meet: his very being depends upon his meeting it successfully.(172)

Melville's ironic portrayal of assumptions suggests that the lawyer's "being" is under siege and it leaves little question as to his diminished status with respect to insight.

In the end Bartleby and all which he represents are sacrificed. What has been lost is the admittedly problematic value of that capacity to peer into the darkness toward the elemental loneliness and hopelessness that characterize human consciousness.

> Bartleby himself is not so much a tragic Christ figure as he is a Christ-less, communion-less figure, a condition he, unlike the lawyer, is aware of...{This is} Bartleby's incurable truth. (Brodwin 185)

Given epistemology's chilling propensity to suggest that the nature of consciousness is incurably isolated, it is foreseeable that once the lawyer's assumptions are exposed to the hazards of Humean disorder he adopts, in desperation, the extreme tactic of changing his address.

> `Good-bye, Bartleby; I am going - good-bye, and God some way bless you; and take that,' slipping something in his hand. But it dropped upon the floor,and then - strange to say - I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of. (67)

In pursuing this course of action he is finally locking Bartleby into position at a permanently safe distance. His move out of one office and into another is a regressive shift back toward the attractive hermeticism of "Wall" Street. Bartleby, an insight and a condition for which there is evidently neither a use nor a genuine anodyne, is left as he has always lived - alone. The old address, the scene of old and dangerous experiences, is emptied of its contents. The lawyer has finally found an escape-hatch. Like the corporate creature that he is, he has excised risk as rapidly as possible, suggesting that the epistemological state of affairs being jettisoned is in itself disquieting enough to have triggered such a violent response.

In their final meeting in the prison yard it is significant that Bartleby's response to the lawyer's presence is one which suggests oblique accusation. "`I know you,' he said, without looking round - `and I want nothing to say to you'" (71). The question arises as to just what it is that Bartleby can be said to know. Despite the skeptical nature of Melville's overall Humean position I think it is possible to conclude that Bartleby's knowledge, in the everyday sense, is twofold. On the one hand as a figure seemingly entranced by the mysterious nature of walls he is a virtual archetype of self-reflexiveness. Bartleby is the component or faculty within the lawyer possessing the greatest claim to respect. Being a part of the fabric of

consciousness the scrivener, in this sense, does not merely "know" the lawyer; more precisely it is he who raises the lawyer (though problematically) above the status of a cellular concatenation. In this manner whatever there is about the lawyer having sufficient "substance" to participate in cognitive activity resides within Bartleby. Bartleby, in the simplest of terms, is mind, although Hume emphasizes the actual impossibility of verifying its presence.

However, there is also a sense in which Bartleby can be said to possess "knowledge" or experience of an entirely different order, experience ultimately related to the question of teleology. As the fullest possible exemplification of an inscrutable Humean phenomenon Bartleby's persistent proximity to the symbolic resonance of a near wilderness of walls is highly suggestive. Not only is he transfixed by the walls of the law office but by implication he is also associated with the broader ramifications of the layered structure of Wall Street, so much so that he is the only member of the office staff who spends all of his spare time (in effect all of his life) ensconced within Wall Street's peculiar masonry. This certainly suggests that the masonry in question is something more than concrete blocks. Beyond this the reader also knows that Bartleby ends his life within the Tombs, this time quite literally locked within a prison whose most

noteworthy feature is its inescapable walls. It would seem reasonable that, taken together, Bartleby's walls can be viewed as symbolic evocations of a walled consciousness, epistemology and ontology. Demonstrating this kind of disquieting consistency Bartleby's very existence suggests the presence of a teleology of privation, a state of affairs within Nature effectively guaranteeing the frustration of human inquiry.

This can perhaps be better understood if Bartleby is viewed for a moment in the light of some of the symbolic territory he shares with Pierre Glendinning. Pierre, it will be recalled, is associated repeatedly (even within his name) with images of stone. Bartleby, as was noted above, is oddly fixated on the very solidity and imperviousness of walls. Pierre retreats into near stasis, an "...isle - peak... in the midst of waves" (343). Bartleby's contemplation of walls grows ever more concentrated until, within the prison yard, he is virtually locked on to the significance of his surroundings even to the point of refusing to eat. Both men die in their respective prisons, Pierre no longer able to overlook "the grief of Eternity" (343) and Bartleby no longer able to withstand inescapable Humean loneliness. Thus as John Irwin has suggested walls form a heavily laden symbolic chain in Melville's work(312).

The figure which unites both of these characters and clarifies the nature of the teleology at work in their lives

is that of Enceladus, the helpless victim of a sinister power of creation with whom Pierre comes to identify himself as his life unravels beyond repair (385-388). Enceladus is appropriately a stone figure whose limbs have been amputated by Nature, a force represented here by the seemingly innocuous mound or hill toward which Enceladus is forever doomed to stare as if in irrecoverable shock. It is significant that the object of his frozen look is outwardly deceptive, an originary force whose true proportions only emerge upon extremely close scrutiny. This is strongly suggestive of Melville's concept of God, a being whose true nature is concealed behind the ambiguity deliberately designed to overshadow the entire realm of human experience.

More to the point, however, Enceladus is helpless not only as a cripple but also because he is solidified in stone. Seemingly paralyzed in midstride without self-control, he exemplifies the stone or walled ontology of all humanity. Thus Pierre and Bartleby, by virtue of their close association with the significance of recurring references to stone and walls, are also amputated from their first moment of existence. Both are vulcanized, trapped in amber presumably for some undisclosed higher purpose. Each, stricken into hopeless contemplation, represents a fated stillness and irremediable privation. Insofar as Bartleby embodies virtually every aspect of this condition he can be said in the loose sense to "know" this as well, and thus the

lawyer is quite deeply implicated by Bartleby's veiled suggestion of betrayal.

It is at this point that the epistemological significance of Bartleby's relationship with the lawyer emerges with greater clarity. The law, viewed as merely inadequate in Moby-Dick, has now triggered a considerably more disturbing conflict of worldviews, one which represents something of a trial run for the account of Billy Budd's fate at the hands of Capt. Vere in his legal capacity as prosecutor and judge. In the present story, however, the law's culpability transpires within the domain of subtle omission. The lawyer cannot or will not see that Bartleby is an evocation of trapped consciousness, that just as Bartleby's motives are concealed from view so too are those of everyone else. Rather than consider the possibility that Bartleby is in fact indistinguishable from himself, the lawyer invokes a lawyer-like reasoning (now a familiarly dark metaphor) to save himself from unsafe insights. After all, this is the man whose own self-portrait places a favorable emphasis on his "safe" choices (40). Concerned primarily with his continued security within the comfortable environment of Wall Street, he focusses on propriety, one more rational imposition within a leaky social structure which has already been subjected to far too much rational tampering. The lawyer's entire network of establishing connections or insights is contingent on the steady presence

of reason's filters, and it is within the gaps or blind spots of these filters that Bartleby undergoes betrayal and death. Thus the law, in its reasoned rejection of the actual chaotic state of affairs, is already lethal in its consequences. Bartleby's death in the fetal position at the appropriate blank wall in the prison yard represents the lawyer's reasoned justification for taking no action, in effect an indirectly successful effort to kill, in its infancy, his own vague awareness that the world is rife with danger.

Considering the lawyer's consistently close relation to these darker resonances of the law it seems rather puzzling that his efforts to draw Bartleby's attention to the alleged significance of a patch of green grass in the prison yard (71) are welcomed as self-evident indicators of his benevolence and powers of understanding.

> To the lawyer the presence of the grass in the Tombs is as wonderful as its presence in the heart of eternal pyramids... The saving power attributed to the green grass is the clue to Melville's affirmation.
>
> The green of the grass signifies everything that the walls, whether black or white or blank, do not... It is the color of growth and of all pastoral experience. (Marx 102)

Given what the reader can determine of the lawyer's tendencies, the question of what he considers to be "wonderful" must be viewed with skepticism. As to his role as something of a mouthpiece for Melville's alleged intention to affirm the value of a pastoral perspective, it

is certainly worth noting that the articulation of such an important view has apparently been delegated to a character whose weaknesses of thought and will are severe enough to hasten the death of another person. This hardly seems consistent with even the loosest standards of credibility.

Perhaps the primary problem here is that of situating the patch of green grass in a suitable context. As was seen earlier with respect to the screen in the lawyer's office, green is the lawyer's color and so it is natural that he would be the one to focus on the grass; it symbolically represents all which attracts his disposition. However, it must also be remembered that the grass is located in the immediate vicinity of a blank wall. Considering the pervasiveness of walls in this story and their repeated symbolic association with the limits of epistemology and ontology, it would appear likely that the overall effect is one of ironically diminishing the redemptive characteristics of green. This would at least be consistent with the lawyer's dim showing elsewhere in the story. The lawyer notices the grass but is unimpressed by the wall for precisely the same reason that he is sensitive to propriety but blind to the acutal nature of consciousness.

Marx's interpretation, however, raises a more serious question. Given an epistemology of near relentless skepticism, how is it possible to speak of growth without lapsing into self-contradiction? In order to posit the very

idea of growth one must first have a stable environment whose nature is comprehensible enough to be isolated before its dynamics can be subsequently tracked and measured. In the Humean realm, however, knowledge doesn't exist precisely because phenomena (including the self) are so amorphous that their presence can neither be adequately discerned nor discussed. Similar to deconstructionists of the present Melville and Hume inhabit a walled consciousness which is denied presence or access to anything beyond "impressions". This is why walls or allusions to blankness throughout Melville's work are forbidding, and why death on a patch of grass beside a predictably blank wall could hardly symbolize growth in the Melvillean sphere. Marx's reasoning bears an uncanny resemblance to the strategies of Melville's confidence-man. Anything, it seems, can be made to look good.

The final aspect of Bartleby's experiences to be examined here is that of his prior employment in the Dead Letter Office. At first glance this detail appears irrelevant, at best a final brush stroke of pathos which enlists the reader's sympathy for what has clearly been something of a tortured life. However, it is the implications of Melville's epistemological position that indicate that this passing reference has applications of a far darker, symbolic nature.

Bearing in mind that the Dead Letter Office is the final repository of all of those messages or probes which failed to reach their destination and that the story protrays human existence as plagued by walls within consciousness which are impervious to all attempts at scrutiny, it would seem possible that the Dead Letter Office is somehow emblematic of a Humean state of affairs. Given a truncated consciousness trapped by its own unverifiable structure and by the further fluidity of whatever may constitute the external world, it stands to reason that the mind never connects adequately to anything whatsoever. Thus all external events and even the mind itself are hidden from view. For Hume this restricts our focus to "impressions", epistemology's equivalent to an inevitable Dead Letter Office.

The significance of this symbol does not end here, however. The Dead Letter Office, after all, houses messages, articulated language which fails to connect with its designated target. It is not my intention here to suggest that Melville's story seeks in any great detail to fashion a theory of how language operates. Nevertheless from the perspective of my particular reading Melville's pervasive Humean epistemology can be seen to generate what would have to be called a number of justifiable inferences and one of these is that language would not be able to lead one any further than impressions do. In effect, just as

impressions cannot verify how the world works and how the self can even be called a "self", so too would language forever have to miss its mark. This would indicate an inevitable, total failure of communication and understanding, a language whose very alphabet consisted of "dead letters". This, upon reflection, bears more than a passing resemblance to what Jacques Derrida now refers to as "dissemination", a process whereby signifiers merely generate other signifiers without ever gaining safe access to a signified. Epistemology, whether viewed from the angle of impressions or language, looks out upon an uninhabited wilderness. The lawyer's invocation of humanity in reference to Bartleby can be seen in this context to affirm indirectly the prominence of this particular epistemological bind within the very fabric of the human condition. Thus as Bruce Grenberg has suggested, "...in `Bartleby' Melville makes it painfully clear that there is no longer anything at all to be explored or even questioned `out there'"(167).

If we reconsider the story for a moment, it now seems evident that the case for viewing Bartleby as a universal figure is a compelling one. "Bartleby, The Scrivener" is perhaps the most distilled rendering of the nature and significance of Melville's epistemology. Through its invocation of a now familiar structural pattern it unearths the degree to which the impossibility of determining what can be known and how one can be certain that one knows it

can splinter the elementary stability assumed to reside at least within all things deemed to be trivial. The resulting kaleidoscope is a preliminary vision of the constancy of doubt, a vision which, though subsquently unchanging in its basic makeup, will nonetheless extract an increasingly heavier toll within the expanding radius of its fallout. "Bartleby" is the first palpable blast of something which cannot be stopped, an eruptive gesture whose termination in The Confidence-Man and Billy Budd will destroy everything in sight.

PART THREE

"BENITO CERENO"

The third and final work to be examined in what can be considered the first phase of Melville's epistemology is "Benito Cereno", a story that structurally parallels "Bartleby, The Scrivener" in ways which a cursory reading would not lead one to suspect. In the case of the earlier story it was noted that Melville's Humean position was established in large part by undermining the credibility of the lawyer's reliance on the efficacy of reason, a faculty exemplified by the orderly assumptions and operations which are permitted to function as foundations for the everyday practice of the law. Thus the law was a metaphor pointing to all which cannot be known and cannot be trusted. In the present story knowledge is once again subverted by the close scrutiny of a character whose similar occlusions of consciousness are related to the dangerous metaphorical resonances of institutionalized religion, a vocation whose dependence on dogmatic reason is structurally identical to that of the law.

Beyond this, however, "Benito Cereno" invokes virtually all of the structural components comprising that matrix through which Melville persistently poses epistemological questions. The purpose of this chapter will be not only to flesh out the Humean ramifications of this matrix within the limited context of the story's own boundaries but also to

place special emphasis on the significance of a number of specific symbols which link the narrative to some of the concerns of "Bartleby, The Scrivener". In addition close attention will be given to the role of the metaphor of religion here as a means of suggesting how this story anticipates the considerably more articulated focus on all matters religious in The Confidence-Man. From this point onwards Melville's Humean epistemology paradoxically moves ever further into the terrain of theism. What emerges incipiently in "Benito Cereno" is what Bruce Grenberg characterizes as a sense of "the worst of all possible worlds"(158).

A compressed evocation of the story's entire epistemological thrust can be glimpsed in an extended passage which introduces the reader to Capt. Delano's unique powers of observation.

> Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mold. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come...[The San Dominick]...appeared like a whitewashed monastery after a thunderstorm, seen perched from some dun cliff among the Pyrenees. But it was no purely fanciful resemblance which now, for a moment, almost led Captain Delano to think that nothing less than a shipload of monks was before him. Peering over the bulwarks were what really seemed, in the hazy

> distance, throngs of dark cowls; while, fitfully revealed through the open port-holes, other dark moving figures were dimly descried, as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters. (239-240)

Much is transpiring here. From the early portions of the above passage it is apparent that the environment in which Delano actually finds himself is permeated by the color gray. This symbolizes the actual epistemological state of affairs, a state inundated by shadows, haze, dim figures and the impossibility of delineation. Poor vision and opacity suggest a direct connection to "Bartleby, The Scrivener" where the predicament of Humean instability was symbolically associated with Bartleby's grey eyes. For Capt. Delano little has changed. As Grenberg writes, "Benito Cereno" is "a gray, surreal world of stasis, non-events, uncertain meanings, and dead-end clues..."(158).

Capt. Delano, however, is conspicuously unimpressed by the ubiquity of greyness and its accompanying difficulties. Instead he is captivated by what appears to him to be the greater significance of the simplicity of black and white. Like the lawyer whose walls were appropriately black and white Capt. Delano is being figuratively linked to those tendencies which seek out neat, simple and comforting explanations. On the basis of this shared symbolic structure a reader who has already encountered the former story can predict long in advance precisely what kind of

epistemological disaster will adhere to a consciousness of this nature.

Evidence of this disaster is near at hand. Delano's powers of recognition are so truncated that he commits a perceptual gaffe which inverts the nature of the experience before him. Far from being the locus of an ongoing violent revolt the San Dominick. in Capt. Delano's personal, cognitive haze, takes on the disarming appearance of a monastery, a haven of tranquility and goodness. The image triggering this near-fatal error of judgment is the San Dominick's whiteness. The "colorless, all-color" white already explored so resonantly in Moby-Dick and seen once again in Bartleby's blank walls is symbolically at work in an equally disturbing fashion in this story as well. The surface glare of Humean phenomena, typified by the ship's whiteness, invites more than one conceivable interpretation. Surfaces, holding a unique appeal for Capt. Delano, merely present the illusion of safety. Whiteness is thus, once again an innocuous sign of a concealed threat.

The symbolic role of whiteness as seen in the passage above is highly suggestive. Not only does it point to the polarized simplicity of Capt. Delano's attachment to clear, black and white explanations, but it is further affiliated through this simplicity with the perspective of religious imagery. This suggests more than a passing resemblance to the nature of the attachment of "Bartleby"'s lawyer to the

similar, ostensible clarity of the law. Furthermore there is also a familiar component of visceral threat in whiteness. This is seen not only in Delano's misinterpretation of a death ship for a monastery but also in the fact that soon afterwards he is placed in close proximity to the oddly disquieting white noddy with its connotations of somnambulism (241).

Whiteness even serves symbolically here to destabilize the alleged hierarchical value of racial designations and so-called master-slave relationships. Although Melville's epistemology in the very strict sense renders such designations impossible in practice, this impossibility is illustrated in the narrative positing of relations that are subsequently shown to collapse. Thus the black "slaves", mysterious and violent, are in effect indistinguishable from the whites who seek to prolong an unachievable state of slavery. Racial and power relationships are inverted in the broader wh teness of epistemology. Thus from the story's very beginning whiteness has lost much of its traditional, symbolic association with piety, and Delano's thoughts of monks and cloisters ironically illustrate this point.

It was noted earlier that the colors grey, white and black have the same symbolic, epistemological significance here as in "Bartleby The Scrivener". Within this Humean scheme it is also apparent that Capt. Delano's severe error of interpretation with respect to monasteries and monks is

not unlike the lawyer's persistently muddled view of Bartleby. Both men, after all, exhibit a fondness for the ease attached to perspectives of a black and white nature. The underlying suggestion would appear to be that Delano and the lawyer fail similarly because their reasoning pursues a similar path. When it is further noted that the captain's gaffe has been linked subtly to images of a religious nature, it is difficult to avoid concluding that religious reasoning (such as it is) has been moved into the same precarious landscape already inhabited by the ineffectual structures of the law. Capt. Delano's dogmatic, Christian simplicity, its adherence to the merely black and white, is dangerously out of step with the Humean instability underlying all surface appearances. He is a resident of what Nancy Roundy calls "a world of certainties" ("Present Shadows..."346), an observation corroborated by Bruce Grenberg(159). The consequences here are indistinguishable from those in the former story. Reason moves blindly in a world largely impervious to its scrutiny. Thus Capt. Delano is deprived of insight in precisely the same manner as the lawyer. What remains most interestingly concealed, however, is the shrewdly delicate suggestion that religious dogma, by virtue of its implied close proximity to the messier, epistemological operations of the law, has been consigned to a contemptible dust heap.

With this in mind the entire question of how religion fits into Melville's epistemological scheme must be examined at closer range. Perhaps the best way to begin is by viewing both religion and the law as evocations of an effort to enforce ideological consistency, an effort which almost invariably seeks to negate the significance of all things irritatingly anomalous.

Religion, at least in its institutionalized avatars, initially utilizes reason as a means of explaining why the world works as it does. Because such inquiries tend to invoke the presence of supernatural powers whose existence is not necessarily verifiable through reason alone, the further element of faith is recruited in order to insure the evolution of a body of thought which, once complete, achieves the cherished status of untouchable dogma. Adherence to such an ideology subsequently becomes compulsory under pain of expulsion or suspicion of heresy.

The law, as it turns out, moves along similar developmental lines. Reason is also invoked here as the sole means of determining not only what human actions mean but more importantly how these actions ought to be directed toward some allegedly superior harmony. The additional factor appropriately named "faith" in the domain of religion is given, within the law, the more palatable label of "common sense", a faculty cited by "Bartleby"'s lawyer as a justification for ridding himself of responsibility (56).

The invocation of common sense, however, becomes on close examination simply another means of expressing faith in the validity of a particular chain of ideas which happens to feel compelling.

Once again as in the case of religion, the law codifies behavior to the point of dogma. Deviation from what is now beyond question triggers the legal equivalent to excommunication. In this light the law is the secular world's substitute for religion.

The problems here are numerous with respect to Melville's epistemology. Both religion and the law are viewed metaphorically as systematic ideologies whose alarming reliance on reason posits an unseen and consistent order at the expense of a recognizable realm of pervasive ambiguity. Settling for the black and white of surface appearances, reason as seen in religion and the law flattens events into manageable uniformity by acting on its tendency to be "regulatory"(Grenberg 163). In the Humean scheme, however, external events and whatever may be their alleged nature defy rational comprehension because one cannot be said to be encountering anything other than "impressions", and these are not causally linked. Thus every sense impression is an instance of something mysteriously blinking back into existence before disappearing again. Anomaly has become the rule because everything is inexplicable.

It now becomes possible to recognize with greater clarity that the allusions to religion which are evident in Capt. Delano's initial sighting of the San Dominick are actually quite devastating. Given that a mutiny has just occurred the ship's resemblance to a "whitewashed monastery" is a signal of danger, a subtle suggestion that the ship's "colorless, all-color" quality harbors the capacity to block out the actual nature of things and the actual presence of a threat. In seeing a monastery Capt. Delano is quickly shown to be a familiar avatar of the Melvillean figure incapable of accurately carrying out an act of interpretation when it is most needed. However, when this appalling lack of insight is implicated in the juxtaposition of the symbolic significance of whiteness and the term "monastery", it seems fairly certain that on a more concealed level Melville is instituting an attack on the efficacy of the religious disposition. Associating a monastery with the menace of whiteness is a means of alluding to religion's dangerous tendency to encourage false confidence. In this sense Capt. Delano's own mindset is closely connected to the image of the monastery not only because he is the one who sees it, but more importantly because a belief of this nature effectively shapes or creates the perspective of a Delano. Thus the muddled character of the good Christian illustrates the consequence of of what could be viewed as religious narcolepsy.

Before moving on it is important to situate Melville's use of the metaphor of religion here within a broader context as a means of determining how it ultimately illuminates his overall epistemology. Capt. Delano's flawed judgment, it must be remembered, is a direct result of religion's reliance on the kind of reason which advocates faith or confidence in an order which is allegedly understandable and benevolent. This predicament is initially foreshadowed in "The Lightning-Rod Man" and subsequently subjected to an exhaustive analysis in The Confidence-Man.

In "The Lightning-Rod Man" the story's narrator is subjected to a seemingly amusing sales pitch aimed at convincing him that the natural disasters caused by lightning can actually be circumvented. In effect the lightning-rod man wishes to assert that a particular kind of safety is achievable in the world. Upon close scrutiny, however, it is necessary to recognize that what the lightning-rod man actually wants to sell is belief in lightning-rods more than the material objects themselves. His more concealed product is thus confidence and by implication religious faith. Lightning, however, continues to wreak havoc in the world and the narrator's attitude of contempt toward the salesman is a clear indication that faith, figuratively associated with the dubious efficacy of the lightning-rod, is being portrayed as dangerously

inadequate with respect to any effort to cope with the disasters of human existence.

The Confidence-Man is even more corrosive on this subject. Virtually every avatar of the con-man goes to exaggerated lengths to advocate Christian faith or "confidence" and an accompanying saccharine disposition. Whenever such persuasion succeeds, however, someone is immediately defrauded of his or her money or well-being. Thus what is evident in both of these works is the inefficacy of faith and the particular reasoning which attemps to justify and perpetuate it. In the light of this Capt. Delano's neat but subtle tainting by a religious allusion clues the reader into the fact that consistency requires his faith to be disappointed and it comes as no surprise that his initial impressions of the San Dominick are not merely off the mark but precisely the opposite of what is actually the case. It is the body of thought underlying Delano's faith which is blind here. If he were aboard the Fidèle the confidence-man would be salivating.

The broad failures of Capt. Delano's disposition are most clearly outlined in the similar predicament of Pierre Glendinning.

> Enough, that as to Pierre had descended the numerous other noble qualities of his ancestors; so by the same insensible sliding process, he seemed to have inherited their docile homage to a venerable Faith...Thus in Pierre was the complete polished steel of the gentleman, girded with Religion's silken sash; and his great-grandfather's soldierly

> fate had taught him that the generous sash should, in the last bitter trial, furnish its wearer with Glory's shroud; so that what through life had been worn for Grace's sake, in death might safely hold the man...Pierre little foresaw that this world hath a secret deeper than beauty, and Life some burdens heavier than death. (Pierre 27)

Pierre has in fact inherited the Christian mindset, values surely meant to temper the disappointing nature of the ephemeral achievements of this world with the assurance (almost a promise) that with humility, conformity and that requisite refusal to ask the wrong questions, the disciple is "safe" with respect to the afterlife and divine justice. Implicit here is the belief that Christianity indeed has access to a benevolent God whose ledgers never err. Already one can vaguely detect within this ironic presentation an anticipation of the confidence-man's insidious pleas for trust. Pierre, from the first moment of his life, has been groomed to be theologically trusting, to accept as fact those assumptions which cannot withstand and indeed discourage close examination.

From this stance alone the reader can infer Pierre's later catastrophe. His Christian formation is antithetical to vigilance in a world which somehow always manages to destroy the inattentive or the unsuspecting. Religion uses reason to elaborate a dogmatic, unverifiable and even misleading account of human experience, and then subsequently encourages a faith which necessitates denying what seems to be felt and endured in the present. It is

this epistemological bind that characterizes Capt. Delano's vision of a monastery. Thus not only is the Humean instability of everyday experience highlighted by the failures of religion's peculiar reasoning, but this instability is being subtly shifted narratively into closer proximity to the concept of God which emerges from religion's ironic operations. Rather than undermining any thought of a higher power the contiguity of instability and what amounts to religious coercion appears to have generated the implication that chaos has a divine instigator, a concern whose presence will be more easily recognized when the subject of Providence is discussed later in this chapter.

With these epistemological restrictions inhabiting the very fabric of Capt. Delano's consciousness, his experiences on first boarding the San Dominick prove to be of a nature similar to his initial problematic sighting of the ship.

> The tops were large and were railed about with what had once been octagonal net-work, all now in sad disrepair. These tops hung overhead like three ruinous aviaries, in one of which was seen perched, on a ratlin, a white noddy, a strange fowl, so called from its lethargic, somnambulistic character, being frequently caught by hand at sea...But the principal relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved...with groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked. (241)

All of the circumstances attending the ship's recent history are suggested in the presence of the white noddy and the shield of carved figures. As the story goes on it becomes increasingly apparent that black "slaves" have mutinied against their white "masters". The collapse of safe boundaries relating to race and power seen earlier with respect to the symbolic resonances of whiteness is again evident here. The satyr carved on the shield is predictably dark, suggesting an inversion of roles which in turn are inverted one more time when Capt. Delano eventually finds his white foot placed on Babo's neck(295). This constant symbolic shifting echoes the underlying epistemological instability.

Situated in close proximity to the shield, however, is the white noddy. Like the San Dominick's own ominous whiteness, the noddy's white plumage is the symbolic trigger of an impending threat, in this case the threat of what the narrator refers to as "somnambulism". Thus the noddy could be said to announce the arrival of a consciousness which will prove unable to make sense of what transpires within its view. It is here that the subject of epistemology becomes of crucial importance.

Just as it was apparent that Capt. Delano's initial religious vision was seriously deficient, it is also evident in the passage quoted above that the reader is being presented with what Delano is incapable of recognizing.

Having finally arrived on board, Delano is persistently blind. Implicit in this state of affairs is the positing of a condition within which the external world and human consciousness are so ambiguously constituted that their ultimate nature eludes analysis. This raises serious questions about the possibility of ever distinguishing appearance from reality, an issue that lies coiled at the very centre of Humean skepticism.

The wider significance of Capt. Delano's difficulties with appearance and reality emerges with greater clarity if one examines what the narrator has characterized as "symbolical devices" in the passage above. Upon close scrutiny it is evident that the noddy and the figures on the shield are not the only "symbolical" or resonant experiences which the captain has failed to appreciate. The locked chain around Atufal's neck and the key in Don Benito's possession (256-257) are also misunderstood, as well as the conspicuous Gordian knot which is said to correspond to a similar knot in Capt. Delano's own mind (270-271).

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether Capt. Delano is merely an anomalous victim of a limited intelligence, it is important to note that from within his perspective the ambiguities which encourage alternative interpretations of events in the world suggest that these events are effectively unhinged from any stable and recognizable, underlying order. Appearances or surfaces

become so opaque that any idea of underlying order is not permitted to rise above the status of speculation.

Beneath this, however, is an even more disquieting issue. If appearances are so vague that different minds will claim to understand different things, how can it be known that appearances denote the presence of some actual, existing thing? That hidden network of correspondences which may constitute the actual state of affairs is simply never revealed to the kind of consciousness whose operations are initiated and subsequently shaped by vague sensory impressions. In this light the association of Capt. Delano's inattentiveness with what the narrator calls "symbolical devices" is a figurative means of suggesting that as a failed symbolic thinker he has illustrated reason's "somnambulistic" incapacity to engage itself with those correspondences which are the true target of epistemological inquiry, correspondences which one would ideally wish to see validated.

At the root of Capt. Delano's difficulties is the predictable invocation of an inherently truncated and misleading faculty of reason. For some readers the solution would be to demand even more thinking of someone in Delano's predicament; but the implication here would appear to be that in a world where appearances conceivably reveal nothing about underlying substance and where the very idea of existence can actually be undermined, the resulting

fragmentation is impervious to rational reconstruction. As Nancy Roundy writes, "Objects [such as they are]...are quite capable of shifting their appearance at any time... The result is an epistemological nightmare..."("Present Shadows..."350). This is analogous to Hume's position that our reliance on impressions is such that the relations (particularly of a causal nature) which the mind posits as a necessary part of its belief in the continuous workings of an actual world are not subject to external verification. The net result is the jettisoning of anything that could be characterized as order.

Capt. Delano, it will be recalled, has been associated with the streamlined dogmatism of religious reasoning. Like the law, the body of beliefs comprising the Christian mindset is one which posits a neat, unchanging order. Its consistent subversion here by indeterminacy not only suggests the prevalence of an essentially Humean state of affairs but also proposes Capt. Delano's evocation of Christian faith as a paradigm of the limits of consciousness in general. As Richard Fogle puts it,

> ...the primary theme opposes the appearance, which Delano sees, to the reality, which Delano does not see. `Benito Cereno' is a story of delusion, of a mind wandering in a maze, struggling but failing to find the essential clue. (Fogle 121-122)

As exasperating as Capt. Delano may often appear to be, one can certainly argue that his disoriented "wandering" is symptomatic of epistemology's necessarily failed attempt to

connect with any underlying set of correspondences or "essential clues". In the Humean scheme interpretation is subject to the perpetual threat of unexpected surface alterations utterly resistant to human comprehension and control. What Fogle calls "delusion" and what Melville's narrator calls "somnambulism" are virtually unavoidable. Thus "Benito Cereno" initiates an attack on reason which, in its dependence on the operations of the metaphor of religion, is consistent not only with Melville's previous subversions of reason through the similarly structured metaphor of the law but is also in line with the low esteem accorded reasoning within Hume's particular evocation of radical skepticism.

With Capt. Delano's Christian faith drastically at odds with the unseen instability surrounding him, it is hardly surprising that in his attempt to penetrate Don Benito's reserve he finds himself very much in the position of the Pequod's crew members gazing at Ahab's doubloon.

> But the Spaniard, perhaps, thought that it was with captains as with gods: reserve, under all events, must still be their cue. But probably this appearance of slumbering dominion might have been an attempted disguise to conscious imbecility - not deep policy, but shallow device. But be all this as it might, whether Don Benito's manner was designed or not, the more Captain Delano noted its pervading reserve, the less he felt uneasiness at any particular manifestation of that reserve towards himself. (247)

As each of Ishmael's shipmates had a compelling belief in his own view of the doubloon despite conflicting

alternatives, Capt. Delano precariously believes that he can detect perfectly reasonable and self-soothing explanations for the surface behavior he is witnessing. His explanations are all plausible but deriving as they do from his theologically sanctioned and orderly mindset, they also turn out to be severely wrong. His reasoning will take him no further because the realm of private intentions is characterized by the same indeterminacy to be found in the external world.

Just as concrete, material things and events have been shown in this story to be virtually indistinguishable from mere appearances or sensory impressions and thus highly problematic with respect to their actual nature or even their existence, it is evident that human motives or intentions are similarly constituted. Filtered as they are through the appearances of outward behavior, they trigger all of those skeptical questions formerly concerned with inanimate objects. To the extent that one must posit such things as cause-effect relations through the utilization of reason in order to infer the existence of some object corresponding to one's "impressions", it becomes clear in the passage above that Capt. Delano is faced with a similar Humean predicament when he discovers that he knows nothing of Don Benito beyond his "appearance of slumbering dominion". In the need to arrive at some safe judgment Capt. Delano is, at best, vaguely aware that Don Benito, no

matter how closely his reserve is "noted", exhibits nothing which could be grasped with certainty. In the final analysis Cereno and the rest of his crew are so resistant to epistemological inquiry that one would be hard pressed to prove they possessed any definable, ontological status.

Within these fairly clear Humean parameters it is possible to recognize how the pervasiveness of indeterminacy leads to an indirect invocation of Melville's familiar sub-theme of preference. If character or personal identity is obfuscated by outward appearances which are themselves resistant to understanding, human acts are little more than unexpected vulcanisms harboring the threat of defiant unpredictability. That which cannot be tracked in the outer world is usually referred to as an accident. In the world of the mind those activities eluding classification are frequently relegated to the zone of arbitrariness, preference or even psychopathy. As in the case of Bartleby it would seem that on the San Dominick Don Benito, Babo, Atufal and virtually every other passenger are so walled or blocked from view that their way of being in the world never adequately emerges from the mysterium. The threat of preference here is something of a marker or signpost of the growing miasma of Humean fragmentation to be seen in subsequent phases.

It is from within this context that Capt. Delano's frequent sensations of "confidence" emerge heavily tainted by irony.

> As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other. (250)

Although Capt. Delano believes that it is Don Benito's confidence that he detects (quite an irony in itself) it is clear that on the basis of this mistaken impression his own confidence has been aroused as well. This predicament is repeated on two subsequent occasions (268,272). Two important considerations can be seen to stem from this state of affairs.

The first relates to the consistent role of the word "confidence" in Melville's lexicon. In "The Two Temples", for example, the term is invoked in reference to "the reckless confidence of innocence" (157), suggesting that a quality of this nature can only proliferate where knowledge is dangerously or "recklessly" absent. Capt. Delano, it will be recalled, is especially prone to not getting the point. In The Confidence-Man the reader comes to recognize fairly quickly that whenever the word "confidence" makes another sanctimonious appearance someone is deprived of his or her valuables due to insufficient understanding. Bearing this broader context in mind it is evident that Capt.

Delano's expressions of confidence are equally determined by what he doesn't know.

This leads to a second consideration. From the passage quoted above it is clear that Capt. Delano's confidence is epistemologically baseless but the means by which he enforces this confidence is closely associated with religious reasoning, the extreme nature of whose failure here underscores the degree to which Humean fragmentation resists the imposition of rational assumptions.

> Captain Delano...[was] a person of a singularly undistrustful good-nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. (239)

The absence from Capt. Delano's character of what the narrator implies to be a crucial distrust or skepticism is directly attributable to the occlusions of Christian theology. Like the lawyer in "Bartleby" Delano subscribes (whether he knows it or not) to a reasoned body of thought which, by its very nature, seeks to generate a self-serving uniformity. It is within this precarious state of affairs that Capt. Delano posits confidence and the lawyer characterizes himself as a "safe" man. This ironic parallelism undermines not only institutionalized religion and the law but also their mutual reliance on reason.

When the metaphor of the law finally makes an appearance in this narrative its function is barely distinguishable from its previous avatars in Moby-Dick and

"Bartleby, The Scrivener". However, for some readers the presence of various depositions at the end of the story might seem at first glance to be an especially helpful and indeed trustworthy method of tying up loose ends and revealing the definitive account of what actually transpired aboard the San Dominick. This, I would suggest, does not withstand close examination.

Perhaps the most unsettling view of the law here emerges upon consideration of what, as a practice, it fails to recognize since its epistemological stability is far more threatened by its omissions than by its pronouncements. In this context the court's invocation of the sort of vocabulary which the modern reader might call "legalese" is an attempt to suggest both an objectivity and an authority ironically subverted by their incapacity to answer questions of a fundamental nature. Don Benito's statement, for example, is an exhaustive catalogue of the sequence of events aboard the San Dominick which culminated in the revolt, but no effort is made to determine why such a revolt should ever occur. In focussing merely on its desire to illuminate events of the recent past the law has forcibly removed the San Dominick from any larger cultural and political context. This is especially ironic since the law's very existence is posited on the alleged significance of precisely such contexts. Within Melville's epistemology this act of legalistic self-contradiction is one more nail

in the law's coffin, a situation worsened when it is noted that the court relies heavily on the language of depositions to clarify events which, as Eric Sundquist points out, "the language of the court and the coldblooded documents of history cannot fully `contain'"(106). Thus one can even detect in the gaps of these depositions an implication that once again for Melville language cannot "contain" what it seeks to define, a theoretical concern more fully explored in later phases. Within the resulting vacuum ambiguity is heightened rather than erased because the law's reasoning is at odds with those darker and messier aspects of human experience (such as questions of personal identity and need) not easily subjected to rational legislation.

By neglecting to inquire into the antecedent causes of the revolt, causes ultimately related to one's definition of human nature, the court has failed to resolve the question of the essential nature of the human relationships encountered on the San Dominick. In fact it conspicuously fails to offer even a tentative explanation, suggesting that its habit of isolating specific acts for the sole purpose of determining their legality is in no way relevant to the problematic sphere of ethics or broader claims to knowledge. The law, blind to the instability of the concepts of slavery and mastery, is in the unenviable position of arguing on behalf of the indefensible. As Grenberg interestingly points out, "The Law, with its emphasis on precedents, is

founded upon the rational principle that all people under certain circumstances will govern themselves in a certain, predictable fashion"(164). In the Humean arena this is a prescription for disaster.

A number of epistemological considerations are at work here and all of them appear to be filtered through the indirect invocation of the familiar symbol of whiteness. As was noted earlier the ramifications of whiteness serve to undermine the solidity of racial hierarchies and socially determined power bases. In overlooking such questions, the law, replicating Capt. Delano's muddled interpretation of black and white images at the story's outset, renders a "white" judgment, the kind foreshadowed as early as **Moby-Dick**'s "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" chapter. Capt. Delano, Don Benito and the court (all racially white) issue claims to knowledge which only achieve some semblance of surface credibility on the basis of an agenda which refuses to examine the notion of racial superiority. In this context whiteness, consistent with its earlier appearances, is not only the trigger of a threat (this time that of unexamined racism) but it also designates the presence of an unstable and insufficiently examined area of understanding. The faith in reason which has permitted the court to legislate executions is one that has restricted its attention to the deceptive realm of surfaces, "whiteness" in the widest Melvillean sense.

This latter application of the symbol of whiteness warrants further scrutiny. The law's reasoning, like Delano's theology, purports to explain not only what is happening in the everyday world but also why it is happening. However, insofar as the law is unable to grapple with fundamental issues such as the question of personal identity, the extent to which human nature can actually be defined or even the desirabililty of exploring the influences of antecedent causes, it is apparent that both the external world and the operations of human consciousness are impervious to rational inquiry. The suggestion appears to be that since the events occuring on the San Dominick are so ambiguously layered and unruly, any question of their ultimate significance is overshadowed by the far more urgent question of how one could determine that anything is actually taking place. Since it is reason which achieves understanding or certainty and every invocation of reason in this narrative is shown to be hopelessly inadequate, the convoluted nature of events allegedly taking place somewhere in the external world acquires a distinctly Humean aspect. Without reason no "impression" can be safely attached to an actual existing thing and no observer can posit his or her own self. In this light the poor epistemological performance of the law and Capt. Delano's Christian theology suggests the presence of an irresolvable Humean nightmare, one whose outline can be detected in the implied symbolic

connection to whiteness. Just as whiteness in Melville's work frequently presents an innocuous surface masking a threateningly ambiguous interior, the reasoning of the appropriate "white" man's law and religious speculation articulates a comforting and self-serving order which obfuscates pervasive fragmentation. No matter where one turns, the "colorless, all-color" phenomenon is dangerously close at hand.

Given what now seems to be the universal inefficacy of reason Capt. Delano's predicament achieves the status of a chilling paradigm. As Warner Berthoff writes,

> The states of mind Captain Delano passes through are not, after all, essentially different from the ordinary ways by which we move, more or less blindly, through our works and days. So the story can fairly be seen as composing a paradigm of the secret ambiguity of appearance - an old theme with Melville - and, more particularly, a paradigm of the inward life of ordinary consciousness, with all its mysterious shifts, penetrations, and side-slippings, in a world in which this ambiguity of appearances is the baffling norm. (Berthoff 153)

The "secret ambiguity of appearance" is such that Capt. Delano's inner processes (and by immplication all cognitive processes) do not correspond to the subterranean relations which constitute the actual, unseen external world. This persistent lack of correspondence between thought and event is in fact so vast that in the resulting epistemological haze, much like the haze surrounding the San Dominick, bafflement seeps into even the most trivial of speculations.

With no act of observation remaining static long enough to be trusted, the darker suspicion is that absolutely nothing can be categorized as knowledge. As Grenberg speculates, "In `Benito Cereno'...solipsistic men [are] playing blindman's buff in a world of random, accidental events"(165).

The degree to which this threat subverts any notion of a safe universe can be viewed in the manner by which Melville's language characterizes the mind and whatever is external to it. Don Benito, in his conversation with Capt. Delano after his rescue, says of the San Dominick that "every inch of ground [was] mined into honey-combs" (313). Encrypted within this turn of phrase are allusions not only to the labyrinthine nature of events, but also to their invisibility. Thus it is not enough that occurrences in the external world are darkened by a backdrop of untraceable complexities but they are also "mined" with sudden and unforeseen disaster.

Corresponding to the symbolic "honey-combs" of external events is the narrator's choice of the term "hive of subtlety" (315) to symbolize the mind's opacity. The shared origin of "honey-comb" and "hive" neatly bridges two areas of alien terrain. The mind, like the universe, is layered and subterranean, frightening beneath its commonplace surface. Both spheres are equally impenetrable and inherently dangerous, possessing what their symbols would

perhaps indicate to be a lethal "sting". When they have any contact at all, it is as if two darknesses were colliding.

Threat on this scale necessarily leads to questions about ultimate responsibility. How did humanity ever manage to mire itself in a disaster which erases all possibilities for certainty? Why are the world and the minds of its inhabitants so prone to failed connections? Is this the product of random chance? If it isn't, who or what designed this treadmill? Nature? God? How should one regard this first cause?

Considering the disaster which invariably accompanies the failure to achieve any epistemological stability in the Melvillean universe, Capt. Delano's assertion that "all is owing to Providence" (314) is deceptively complex. On the one hand the Melvillean epistemological perspective which cannot transcend "impressions" with enough safety to posit any sort of existence could hardly claim in the same spirit that evidence exists to warrant a belief in Providence and the God usually held to be its architect. Within this line of thought Providence emerges as a consideration which is consistent with Capt. Delano's Christian mindset and its attendant cognitive failures. Delano, as a believer, is obligated to focus on God rather than on the dangers of careful inquiry. This engenders a need to effectively ignore actual events in the everyday world in exchange for

what is purported to be the ultimate rectification of earthly imperfection in a blissful hereafter. Like the Church Capt. Delano implicitly claims that the concrete, common sense world is insufficiently real while not bothering to notice that God's world is insufficiently accessible. In this sense the mere invocation of Providence is heavily ironic.

However, the nature of the irony at work here is, in my opinion, bizarrely paradoxical. Despite the presence of a skeptical epistemology which is consistently quite Humean, the object of Melville's ridicule would not appear to be the notion of Providence itself but merely the beneficence ascribed to it by Capt. Delano. A number of factors support this interpretation.

Perhaps the most conspicuous of these is the severity of the ironic force consistently directed at any discussion of theological matters, a severity verging on overkill but reminiscent of belief. Beyond this, however, it must also be recalled that Melville's epistemology has unearthed a realm of persistent disorder. Where disorder is the rule of the day the absence of a controllable pattern becomes in itself a pattern, suggesting that someone or something may have orchestrated this predicament.

Within the larger context of Melville's later work there is additional evidence to indicate that a belief in Providence was somehow reconciled with Humean skepticism.

By the time one reaches The Confidence-Man, the second and most intense phase of Melville's inquiry, epistemological speculation cannot be conducted for very long without being moved into the terrain of theology, suggesting that the very nature of this sort of speculation bears some causal connection to a specific, presiding religious state of affairs. Given the disposition of the figure of the con-man, it becomes evident that the God in question is one who deliberately created a Humean war zone in order to frustrate human inquiry. Keeping in mind the character of God's agent aboard the Fidèle one can see that the remarks of Capt. Delano within "Benito Cereno" ironically anticipate the strategies of divine manipulation explored later. Despite his good intentions Delano unwittingly exemplifies the very attitude which, in The Confidence-Man, is directly linked to a successful, supernatural fleecing. This can hardly be coincidental. Finally, it is also worth noting that in Billy Budd, the third and last phase of Melville's inquiry, the execution of Billy ironically raises the spectre of Christ in close proximity to the use on two occasions of the loaded term "fleece" (497), suggesting that the hands of the Almighty are something less than clean in this matter. Thus "Benito Cereno" can perhaps be viewed as the first clear step in Melville's slow merging of epistemology and dark theology. In "Benito Cereno" suffering (insofar as it can be named) is directly related to the impossibility of

knowing, an impossibility whose contours, however chaotic, are seen to be something more than the product of random chance. Thus, consistent with the unavoidable nature of this suffering and the limits of consciousness (unsolicited) which foster such a disaster, the view of Providence which emerges on this count is one at whose center can be found "an unknown so powerful that it rivals Fate" (Fogle 144). Providence is the assurance of failure, fated epistemological darkness shaped by God's unseen and uncaring hand.

As the first phase of Melville's inquiry comes to an end it is evident that the subject of epistemology has been explored through the repeated use of the structural pattern seen in each of the works examined in this chapter. The epistemological position resulting from these similar constructions is one which shares a great deal of territory with Humean skepticism. The external world (such as it is) emerges as a haze of fragmentation within which sensory impressions are viewed as quite possibly disconnected from any verifiable, actual, existing state of affairs. The conscious subject, furthermore, is equally elusive, possessing no unique "impressions" to confirm its status as a solid "self". Finally (and perhaps most importantly) those relations posited by reason as a means of establishing order and continuity in the world have been subverted in a Humean fashion by a demonstration of reason's persistent

failure in the areas of religion and the law. The lingering implication is that nothing can be known with certainty and there is "no safe, predictable world to go back to" (Grenberg 158).

Beyond this the works of the first phase also initiate the means by which a Humean state of affairs can be attributed to a hidden theological agenda, a connection firmly and quite exhaustively defined in The Confidence-Man. It is this overall structure and its consistent implications which are carried forward into the two remaining phases of Melville's epistemological progression. What changes in these phases is predominantly the matter of approach.

CHAPTER TWO

MOVING TARGETS: IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF EPISTEMOLOGY

THE CONFIDENCE - MAN

The second and perhaps most significant phase of Melville's epistemological progress is represented by The Confidence - Man. Here the threat of uncertainty has achieved its maximum proportions by invading even the most concealed crevices of lived experience. The result is a poisonous portrayal of epistemological instability, an evocation of an appropriately white world (the Fidèle) within which consciousness is the target of a brand of violence nurtured by Humean indeterminacy, the dangerous imprecision of language and the unseen maneuverings of a deity utterly incapable of compassion. From this point onwards nothing eludes the corrosive glare of Melville's unrelenting, skeptical squint.

The purpose of this chapter is to inquire into the ramifications of the persistent convergence of three concerns bearing a pivotal relation to Melville's particular epistemology. The first of these is the now familiar question of Humean skepticism. In my analysis of The Confidence - Man I will be attempting to track a Humean slant which, consistent with the spread of whiteness on the macrocosmic scale, has penetrated the domain of human agency and revealed it to be as problematic as the external world. In fact the shift in focus from object to subject or from

thing to mind will be seen to be part of Melville's deeper scrutiny of the foundations of knowledge.

Never too far from this probe is the simultaneous but well concealed evolution of a concept of God which casts this figure in an increasingly malicious light. One of my central goals here will be to demonstrate that this God is implicitly viewed as the orchestrator of epistemological indeterminacy.

The third intersecting factor to be examined is the growing preoccupation with innovations of language denoting not only the increased reliance of epistemology on the limits of linguistic structures but also indicating what I infer to be a convergence of Humean skepticism with a similar failure of signification not unlike some of the implications following from Derridean deconstruction.

Like Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man is a complex and densely textured novel. The analysis which follows should not in any sense be construed as an effort to achieve the status of an exhaustive reading. Instead my purpose is to study the activities of the con-man through the invocation of the structural matrix utilized in the previous chapter as a means of clarifying the points cited above.

A reader's difficulties with this novel begin, in a manner of speaking, before the beginning. As in the case of "Bartleby" The Confidence-Man's subterranean value system is encrypted within the pun of its title. The confidence-man

is thus not only the con-man or swindler but also the man of confidence, the believer oblivious to imminent danger. In the shadow of this surface pun one can detect the added irony of portraying confidence as a quality that has no means of support independent of its baleful relation to the con-man. Thus the two figures invoked by the title represent the extreme boundaries of a war already destined to destroy every corner of human safety under the auspices (as will be demonstrated) of divine ordination.

Perhaps the first matter within the novel requiring exploration is the figurative significance of the Fidèle. Contrary to the ships encountered in earlier works the decks of the Fidèle effectively determine the boundaries of the arena within which human actions transpire, suggesting that in this instance a ship is symbolic of the temporal world. Keeping this in mind the color and name designated to this world are not to be overlooked.

> Pierced along its great white bulk with two tiers of small embrasure - like windows, well above the waterline, the Fidèle, though, might at distance have been taken by strangers for some whitewashed fort on a floating isle.(5)

Oddly echoing the unseen threat which inhered in Capt. Delano's mistaken view of the San Dominick as a "whitewashed monastery" (240), the Fidèle's color indicates that the entire world and the human condition have been escalated into the symbolic sphere of whiteness. Human existence can

now either threaten or be threatened, depending upon where one happens to be precariously positioned. The ubiquity of whiteness has subtly triggered an accompanying level of alarm best indicated by the extreme irony of the ship's name. Just as the San Dominick was "mined into honeycombs" (313) the Fidèle's whiteness suggests that the very structure of the universe is tainted beyond repair. Coupled as they are with the deeper and more pervasive epistemological resonances of this condition, the Fidèle's allusions to "fidelity", trust or confidence are irrevocably subverted. The implication here appears to be that everything subject to human scrutiny must be kept in ironic focus, a focus which steadily takes on the dimensions and texture of a withering skepticism.

Given this siege-like state of affairs it is not surprising that the condition of whiteness has unleashed a white agent, a mind seemingly bent on seeking out those zones of opacity vulnerable to manipulation precisely because they elude human rectification. Psychopathy, formerly little more than an unsettling aberration, is now situated considerably closer to God's doorstep.

The agent of whiteness, the confidence-man, makes his first appearance as the appropriately garbed "man in cream-colors" sporting a white "fleecy" hat (1). For some readers this figure is perhaps what he appears to be on the surface, a meek deaf-mute on a mission of mercy in a world severely

deficient in the area of faith. Surfaces, however, are consistently shown to be deceiving and dangerous in the Melvillean scheme of things and this particular occasion no exception.

Evidence linking the man in cream-colors to the confidence-man is reasonably persuasive. His clothing, suitably white, suggests that his constitution is threatening by virtue of the fact that it escapes human understanding. This in itself may not appear terribly impressive but as the novel progesses it is increasingly apparent that the fragmentation symbolically associated with whiteness is being attributed to the less than kindly agenda of the Almighty and His/Her/Its army of malicious exploiters. Beyond this the deaf-mute's "fleecy" hat, as noted by Henry Sussman (32) and Lawrance Thompson (303), symbolically signals the imminence of a "fleecing" or an act of fraud and this view is corroborated by the fact that the con-man's second avatar, Black Guinea, is characterized as possessing a "black fleece" (7).

Even more damning is the deaf-mute's conspicuous reliance on Biblical invocations, a rhetorical weapon whose persistent dexterity in the hands of the con-man encourages the view that his relations with God are something more than casual. This matter is worthy of some attention.

The appearances of the Bible at both the very beginning and end of the novel establish a baleful circularity which

just happens to coincide with the overall nature of what turns out to be Melville's failed epistemology, an inquiry whose repeated efforts to pose fundamental questions are unavoidably frustrated. With this in mind the Bible's significance to the con-man is highly revealing.

Its presence here can be said to serve two "barometric" functions, one of them evaluative and the other purely exploitative. The man in cream-colors paraphrases the Bible because it enables him to carry out the preliminary activity of any confidence-man, that of "casing" his potential targets in order to ascertain their beliefs and how best to deal with them. In this context the Bible is something of a perverse divining rod attracting the most vulnerable of potential victims. The pervasiveness of this irony throughout the novel not only serves to suggest that the man in cream-colors is indeed an avatar of the confidence-man but it also subtly invokes the familiar metaphor of institutionalized religion and its exemplification of misdirected reasoning. Thus coiled at the center of this portrayal of divine trickery there is also a Humean subversion of reason.

Aside from its value as a detector of vulnerability, the Bible's greater function here is that of a weapon of exploitation and this is most clearly evident in the final chapter when the last victim who is led away by the Cosmopolitan is a reader of the Bible who has presumably

taken its teachings to heart (217). In effect the Word of God proves to be a lie and the character who understands this most fully is the con-man whose disreputable status is unequalled by that of anyone except God. This can hardly be coincidental.

Finally it must also be noted that the confidence-man exhibits a dangerous propensity for self-incrimination. The herb-doctor mentions merely in passing that he is a representative of Nature (94), the P.I.O. man alludes to unverifiable Augustinian conversions (108) and the Cosmopolitan somewhat guiltily suggests to Pitch that the latter undoubtedly views him as some sort of spy (120). In the novel's broader context the tendency on the part of the man in cream-colors to simulate an air of Biblical long-suffering and rectitude emerges as an unwitting admission of bad faith and this is exacerbated by the realization that all of the novel's events transpire on April Fool's Day (1). If there is any joke here it is largely appreciated by God and a freewheeling divine agent.

Accompanying the epistemological and theological concerns discussed above is the suggestion, even at this early stage with respect to the man in cream-colors, that language has not succeeded in escaping the Humean instability associated with the proliferation of whiteness. The efforts on the part of numerous bystanders to classify

or impose a definitive signification onto this figure illustrate this predicament quite succinctly.

> "Odd fish!"
> "Poor fellow!"
> "Who can he be?"
> "Casper Hauser."
> "Bless my soul!"
> "Uncommon countenance."
> "Green prophet from Utah."
> "Humbug!"
> "Singular innocence."
> "Means something."
> "Spirit-rapper."
> "Moon-calf."
> "Piteous."
> "Trying to enlist interest."
> "Beware of him." (4-5)

On the one hand this barrage of voices embodies a hyper-sensitive magnification of Pip's original analysis of the doubloon's changing significance. What Pip grasped in the most schematic fashion in Moby-Dick is now shown to have universal application insofar as the need to make sense of a mundane encounter with some other human being lies at the center of so much of one's cognitive activities. This aspect of the passage above clearly engages itself with those questions of existence and identity which define the nature of Hume's skepticism.

However, there is also a sense in which this passage is more directly concerned with the role of language in achieving or failing to achieve certainty. In subjecting the man in cream-colors to an exhaustive, multi-directional pattern of linguistic scrutiny, Melville's faceless characters, in their bewilderment, unwittingly illustrate

the inability to force a word or signifier to attach itself to or connect with something believed to exist in the outer world. This would tend to shift language into an epistemological territory harboring uncertainties analogous to those already found in Hume, a territory in which the instability of reference is strongly reminiscent of what some modern readers believe can be found in the implications of Derridean dissemination.

If the passage in question is re-examined with respect to how it indirectly invokes a number of components of the structural matrix guiding my study, the connections cited above should emerge with greater clarity. For example, the voices attempting to characterize the man in cream-colors, by virtue of their sheer diversity, validate the view that this first avatar of the con-man is possessed of a nature which eludes definition. On the one hand this is a familiar Humean stumbling block, suggesting that if a person cannot be subjected to adequate scrutiny one would be hard-pressed to maintain that he or she even exists. However, since Melville's characters are attempting to carry out this epistemological task through the invocation of language, the failure of the task also suggests that language has become too diffused or scattered to safely posit any sort of existence or what Derrida would call "presence". Thus language appears to inhabit something of a deconstructive

bind which somehow accompanies the broader context of Humean disorder.

While the figure of the confidence-man eludes the probes of a language seemingly beyond adequate control, it is evident that his shadowgame can only succeed in an environment populated by beings in whose hands this particular instrument of epistemology must fail. Thus the character who escapes definition must be surrounded by other characters incapable of actually defining. It is this latter figure, part of the recurring structural matrix through which Melville engages in epistemological inquiry, whose significance is most strongly felt in the failed effort to isolate the nature of the man in cream-colors. Here, however, the inability to comprehend is directly linked to the indeterminacy of language, a state of affairs which parallels the simultaneous presence of a far more pervasive fragmentation within the larger scheme of things. Thus the subtle invocation of two recurring types of character leads to the same baleful vision of a world menaced by opacity.

Bearing this condition in mind it is now possible to recognize in the same passage the implied presence of the sub-theme of preference. In the failure to find any definitive label or signification which could freeze the man in cream-colors long enough to know who and what he is, the gestures and intentions of this figure are necessarily

detached from any recognizable notion of order. Instead he must be regarded as someone whose constitution is fueled by the hidden idiosyncrasies of preference, a chaotic state of affairs subject to unanticipated changes. It is this which defines his status as a threat, one within which the operations of consciousness, because they are unseen, are effectively indistinguishable from psychopathy. Thus Melville's epistemological perspective here is one in which indeterminacy is a force fostering skepticism and undermining safety.

On the basis of this examination of the man in cream-colors it is possible to recognize how Melville's epistemological inquiry within **The Confidence-Man** moves along three converging paths, two of them strictly epistemological and the third more properly theological. In his association with the familiar symbolic significance of whiteness the con-man's presence alludes to an essentially Humean state of affairs. In his capacity to defy satisfactory description he also illustrates an especially corrosive, deconstructive flaw within language. Finally his familiarity with Biblical rhetoric places him suspiciously close to the figure of a malicious deity terrorizing the temporal world.

This configuration of concerns can be seen as something of a model of the novel's strategy of subversion, the levers which, once pulled, unleash a disaster too devastating to be

cleaned away. Whenever the con-man appears he can be found tampering with one or more of these levers.

In his third avatar as John Ringman, the man with the weed, the confidence-man predictably toys with the notion of identity by anticipating his target's skepticism and appropriating it as his own offensive weapon.

> "Don't you recall me, now? Look harder."
> "In my conscience - truly - I protest," honestly bewildered, "bless my soul, sir, I don't know you - really, really..."
> "Still you don't recall my countenance?"
> "Still does truth compel me to say that I cannot, despite my best efforts," was the reluctantly candid reply."...Are you not, sir, Henry Roberts, forwarding merchant, of Wheeling, Pennsylvania? Pray, now, if you use the advertisement of business cards, and happen to have one with you, just look at it, and see whether you are not the man I take you for."
> "Why," a bit chafed, perhaps, "I hope I know myself."
> "And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else. Stranger things have happened." The good merchant stared. (15)

Since the nature of the con-man's own identity must be concealed at virtually any cost, Ringman's approach here is to maneuver Mr. Roberts into a state of disorientation by suggesting that the merchant is uncertain about himself. Maybe his powers of discernment are indeed so dim that he has not even suspected this predicament despite the passage of time. At first glance this appears to be a farce but its unseen ramifications are insidious.

The underlying strategy here is to suggest that since self-knowledge is so difficult to acquire (and Ringman makes this palatable by moving it into the more general sphere of Philosophy) one can hardly trust one's judgment about anyone else's identity or probity. Clearly there is an intent to undermine all of the merchant's thinking and in fact to anaesthetize it. The con-man uses the shrewdly outrageous device of attacking precisely what is assumed to be above question or suspicion. The resulting surprise immediately places his target in the weaker, defensive position of having to justify who he himself is while exempting the con-man from the necessity of undergoing a similar scrutiny. The con-man subsequently relies on this powershift to make manipulation a more likely possibility.

The irony pervading this situation is extreme. The merchant's justifiable caution takes on the appearances of slow-wittedness while Ringman displays or replicates not only an ostensibly superior intellect but also the controlled outrage of offended virtue. The best swindler, it would seem, is a saint with total recall.

A number of considerations follow from this. Among them is the question of the con-man's inconvenient propensity for self-incrimination. Just as the man in cream-colors simulates meekness and paraphrases the Bible to the point of becoming suspect, Ringman's air of stern propriety not only diminishes his credibility but it also

situates him within the terrain of Melville's concept of God. In the same way that the man in cream-colors emerges as the agent of a God not to be trusted, Ringman's status as a similar figure is suggested by the very energy he expends in erecting and maintaining a contrary image while fleecing targets by means of testing their adherence to the doctrine of Christian faith.

His self-incrimination, however, does not end here. Like the Cosmopolitan who reveals himself to be a spy by accusing Pitch of harboring this suspicion (120), Ringman discloses the disreputable nature of his own credentials by devoting considerable attention to an examination of those of Mr.Roberts. Time and again the con-man utilizes the weakest aspect of his own character as a means of subverting the safety of his victim. Combined as this is with a remarkable facility for exploring the ethical and indeed theological applications of trust in the temporal world, it is difficult to view such a figure as anything other than God's agent provocateur.

Hidden within the machinery of this broad agenda is the threatening epistemology which seemingly perpetuates the status quo. Ringman, it will be recalled, unravels the merchant's stability by questioning the authenticity of his self-knowledge, a roundabout method of suggesting that if Mr. Roberts cannot be certain about what constitutes his "self", perhaps he does not have one at all. And if there

is even the slightest possiblity that he lacks a self, it follows that all claims to knowledge (since only a self can "know") are suspect.

This rather explosive line of inquiry is quite faithful to the nature of Humean skepticism. For Hume, as was mentioned earlier, there are no impressions validating the existence of the self and thus there are no corresponding ideas of this entity. The con-man's attack therefore goes quite far in disarming his target.

Just as the man in cream-colors was shown to be an evocation of the character who eludes definition, it is evident that Ringman (himself a character who perplexes his fellow passengers) posits a Humean state of affairs by portraying Mr. Roberts as a compression of the character who cannot define and the character who cannot be defined. Thus the novel's epistemological trajectory continues to be determined by the invocation of the same structural patterns, an invocation which is not threatened by the con-man's insincerity since the very possibility of seriously raising such problems in everyday discourse serves to illustrate the validity of the ambiguity which the con-man exploits.

While the con-man emphasizes indeterminacy for self-serving purposes it is clear that he himself fails to escape the traps of the epistemological state of affairs which perpetuates his success.

> "Well, he's just what I said he was."
> "A white masquerading as a black?"
> "Exactly." The man in grey glanced at the young clergyman a moment, then quietly whispered to him, "I thought you represented your friend here as a very distrustful sort of person, but he appears endued with singular credulity. - Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting."
> "Not much better than any other man acts."
> "How? Does all the world act? Am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?"
> "Yes, don't you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors."
> "You trifle." (27)
>
> The man in grey stood silently eying his retreat a while, and then, turning to his companion the clergyman, said: "A bad man, a dangerous man; a man to be put down in any Christian community. - And this was he who was the means of begetting your distrust? Ah, we should shut our ears to distrust, and keep them open only for its opposite." (28)

In his fourth avatar as the man in grey the con-man is subverted by precisely the same condition which enabled him to exploit Mr. Roberts while masquerading as John Ringman. What was formerly a weapon has acquired an unanticipated recoil.

When the old one-legged man who is questioning the credibility of Black Guinea employs a pun on the term "acts" it becomes increasingly clear that the knowledge of inner natures which Ringman went to great lengths to discredit with respect to Mr. Roberts is also subject to repudiation when the man in grey is the object of scrutiny. In suggesting by his play on words that human agents are not

merely doers of actions but also perhaps "actors" or duplicitous forces beyond verifiable understanding, the old man has invoked the classical Humean distinction between appearance and reality. If all one possesses of another's nature is sensory evidence of an ongoing sequence of disconnected actions or events which are themselves highly ambiguous, the resulting "impressions" (in Hume's terms) cannot be said to denote the presence of an actual, existing person. Thus underlying the old man's shrewd commentary are those questions relating to existence and personal identity which the con-man normally relies upon to disarm his targets. Humean indeterminacy, however, is shown here to be something of a double mirror, undermining its user as well as its intended victim.

Through this subtle invocation of the question of appearance and reality it is possible to recognize not only how Melville persists in positing characters who are either indefinable or incapable of defining, but also how the sub-themes of accident and preference remain at the center of his epistemology. From the passages cited above the indeterminacy adhering to Black Guinea (and by implication to the man in grey) suggests that his external actions or appearances are in fact so nebulous that their occurrence is indistinguishable from the accidental. One can additionally infer from this state of affairs that the con-man's intentions, at least as unclear as his outer manifestations,

have been shifted into the dangerous realm of preference. This tends to illustrate the manner in which the threat attached to the indefinable character takes on the appearances of psychopathy, a condition which in this phase has transcended the earlier disturbing passivity of a Bartleby and become instead an unseen source of malice. What can't be known is now an overt danger to one's well-being.

Accompanying the more strictly Humean aspects of epistemology in these passages are related problems of the efficacy of language. The old man's pun on the word "actor" and the confidence-man's deliberate misuse of "distrust" establish the necessary link between experience and language, a link whose ultimately Humean roots for Melville predictably negate the possibility of achieving any trustworthy level of epistemological protection through signification. This is illustrated quite powerfully in the old man's efforts to state his case while simultaneously appearing as if he actually had nothing of interest to say.

Sparring with the man in grey the old man cleverly alludes to pretense while also maintaining that he is only speaking of actions. His criticism, from a tactical point of view, implicitly acknowledges the danger and elusiveness not only of motives but also of the larger sphere of reference and this is accomplished by his decision to erect an analogous though necessary wall of semantic ambiguity.

The con-man, far more concerned with coercion than safety, introduces the notion of distrust as a weapon when in fact the old man has carried out, however problematically, an attempted act of recognition rather than one of mere distrust.

This fluid shifting of semantic postures through punning and innuendo serves to illustrate the manner in which indeterminacy pervades language while maintining the surface appearance of transparency. The subterranean maneuvers of linguistic meaning allude to the similar unseen changes at work within the human subject on the occasion of even the most trivial of transactions.

> All `character', it seems, may be `fictitious'. This is wholly, so far as we know, a world of roles and poses - including the pose of sincerity. The world of the Fidèle is a world of words, floating `at large and unrelated'. (Bell 235)

Michael Davitt Bell's focus on "floating" words highlights two problems inhering in language as envisioned by **The Confidence-Man**, one of them concerned with utility and the other with reference. In the encounter between the old man and the man in grey, for example, it is apparent that words and their problematic contextual implications are all that a conscious subject has at hand to enable him or her to interpret any experience. The fact that this facility stands alone in such a vital endeavor is in itself alarming and the situation is only worsened when one pauses to consider that sometimes the experience being assimilated

and the agent doing the assimilating, in the case of the old man and the man in grey, are themselves characters reduced to an ever-shifting barrage of words being manipulated by something which resides beyond disclosure. It is here that the problem of reference emerges.

When words are seen clashing with other words the question of how one could determine with certainty that some existing, underlying state of affairs has actually been clarified achieves an unavoidable degree of urgency. The line of thought which follows from this, though not Humean, oddly parallels that of Hume. Just as "impressions" were shown to be too ambiguous to permit one to posit the precise nature of some allegedly external object, it is now evident that language in the hands of Melville's characters generates a wilderness of mirrors. Words or signifiers are so prone to "floating" that they function in the ultimately uncontrollable manner suggested by what is now termed Derridean "dissemination". Thus it is hardly a coincidence that the shifting pattern of meanings seen in the exchange between the old man and the man in grey is matched by a similar instability viewed in the motives which lie behind human agency and in the significance of external events. All are subject to precisely the same epistemological predicament.

From this it is now possible to recognize how particular deconstructive aspects of language in the novel

are implied by Melville to buttress a more prevalent Humean epistemology. Indefinable and non-defining characters whose status within the structural matrix I am exploring is determined by their residency in a Humean universe have carried the appropriate epistemological and ontological occlusions into their invocations of language. Thus the limits of language portrayed here are viewed as an appropriate accompaniment to the Humean scheme mentioned above.

Also present in the exchange between the old man and the man in grey is an ironic portrayal of the religious vocation. Much like Mr. Roberts in his experience with John Ringman, the old man whose suspicion of Black Guinea is perhaps well-founded is subjected to vilification not only by the con-man from whom one would anticipate such a response, but also indirectly by the young clergyman whose silence and ineptitude effectively reinforce the con-man's air of assumed superiority. Most significant here is the discrepancy between the clergyman's obliviousness to manipulation and the claims on the part of his vocation that men of God are in a unique position to detect the presence of evil when they are tripping over it. Functioning as he does as an exponent of a reasoned and orderly body of Christian thought, the clergyman in his failure represents an evocation of the now familiar metaphor of religion. The

systematic nature of Christian optimism has become a measure of the mind's margin of error.

While the subject of a Christian perspective ironically subverts the validity of reasoning when it is associated with the institutional aspects of religion, its significance (for the reader) in the repertoire of the con-man is related to its capacity to incriminate God and His/Her/Its psychopathic agent. Thus just as Ringman's focus on the credibility of his target's credentials served to highlight the threatening nature of his own, the man in grey's slick familiarity with the nuances of Christian theology would seem to suggest that something about the nature of such an odious character is especially well-suited to whatever state of affairs lies at the very root of a Christian ontology. It is here that the con-man unwittingly mirrors God.

Bearing this in mind the rhetoric of the con-man proves to be quite revealing. The old man who has skeptically rejected Black Guinea is dismissed as "a bad man, a dangerous man; a man to be put down in any Christian community" (28). Upon reflection it is apparent that this judgment is entirely in line with the manner in which those who are held to represent the Almighty in the temporal world enforce the word of God. Skepticism, the suspicion that some instances of suffering may go unnoticed by the universe, is deemed sinful by virtue of its breach of faith. Thus the old man has met the central criterion of sinfulness

while simultaneously sensing the presence of legitimate threat aboard the Fidèle.

This paradox is duplicated in the fact that a presumably accurate Christian judgment has been achieved by a swindler who ordinarily could not be expected to have assimilated the finer points of Christian guilt and damnation. A question immediately arises as to the possibility that some connection exists between the accuracy of this judgment and the nature of that agent who succeeded in making it. If insights about what ultimately constitutes sinfulness are best acquired by a nature which is predominantly manipulative, it would appear likely that the broader realm of whatever could be called Christian being is balefully flawed.

Implied by this predicament is the likelihood that an ontological condition which permits the con-man to achieve so advanced a level of theological expertise is one whose order is governed by a principle or a nature analogous to his own. In this sense the con-man and God are related by virtue of a shared disposition.

The pivotal flaw which permits determinations of sinfulness to be enforced ultimately by a deity with an agenda of malice is seen in Melville's work to be the root cause of the discrepancy between the optimistic perspective encouraged by reason's appropriation of the more palatable aspects of Christianity and the actual nature of the

experiences endured in the everyday world. The discrepancy between a human institution's notion of God and God's actual nature is exemplified in the confidence-man's sophisticated duplicity. Thus God is the originator of the lie, something the confidence-man unwittingly validates later by invoking the notion of unnoticed divine spying (120). The "real" Christianity, if such a term can be used, is one in which moving targets are terrorized by a divine enemy who never fully emerges from a celestial barricade.

The ontological and epistemological fracture posited by the con-man is extended in his successful exploitation of a religious woman.

> "Grieve not for that, madam," rising and folding up the banknotes. "This is an inconsiderable sum, I admit, but," taking out his pencil and book, "though I here but register the amount, there is another register, where is set down the motive. Good-bye; you have confidence. Yea, you can say to me as the apostle said to the Corinthians, "I rejoice that I have confidence in you in all things." (38)

Perhaps of greatest interest here is the suggestion that God is something of a cosmic chartered accountant in whose convoluted ledgers can be found entries corresponding to even the most insignificant events in the temporal world. This clearly alludes to the kind of theological and ontological dualism cited above with respect to the con-man's incrimination of both God and himself. Once again the testimony of God's agent would seem to indicate that the

heavenly ledgers are primarily filled with a record of divinely inspired suffering. The target on this occasion is predictably a religious woman, someone more deserving of compassion than ruthlessness. Thus the con-man's superior understanding or expertise in this ironic context would tend to point toward a divine nature which is distinctly "other", one having so little in common with human aspirations that it has spawned a malicious avatar whose sole responsibility is to encourage existential defeat.

Proof of this incongruity is perhaps most evident in the disasters which accompany the use of what is allegedly God's vocabulary. The man in grey, upon successfully swindling the religious woman, alludes to St.Paul and compliments her on an exemplary demonstration of "confidence", a term which effectively stands in for the more familiar notion of faith. Biblical language, it seems, virtually invites catastrophe.

> Throughout his various enterprises, the double crossing Confidence-Man blandly preaches the Christian doctrine of faith, hope, and charity, because it helps him in his business...The pivotal motif of the entire action is betrayal of faith; allegorically, God's betrayal of man's faith. (Thompson 299-300)

If one asks why theological language functions in this manner, the response implied by the similar dispositions of God and the con-man is that it was intended to provide a lever which would insure the success rate of divine

exploitation. Biblical rhetoric and its accompanying "confidence" inspire diminished vigilance in an environment forever encroaching upon one's precarious safety. Thus the word of God is a lethal anaesthetic without which the con-man is ineffectual.

From an examination of the man in grey it is evident that his theological invocations and their underlying implications incriminate both his own character and that of God. The resulting emergence of a dark portrait of a world at war with its Creator serves to illustrate the means by which Melville's concept of God is developed. It is this particular component of the overall structural pattern representing Melville's epistemological inquiry which is most fully explored in The Confidence-Man.

Just as the man in grey successfully manipulated indeterminacy so as to suggest the actual presence of a state of affairs characterized by both Humean and deconstructive conditions while simultaneously aligning himself with God, the confidence-man, in his reappearance as the herb-doctor, predictably tampers with the same sensitive levers with what could only be called conspicuous dexterity.

> "Take the wrapper from any of my vials and hold it to the light, you will see water-marked in capitals the word "confidence", which is the countersign of the medicine, as I wish it was of the world. The wrapper bears that mark or else the medicine is counterfeit. But if still any lurking doubt should remain, pray enclose the wrapper to this address," handing a card, "and by return mail I will answer." ..."How now?" said the

> herb-doctor. "You told me to have confidence, said that confidence was indispensable, and here you preach to me distrust. Ah, truth will out: "I told you, you must have confidence, unquestioning confidence, I meant confidence in the genuine medicine, and the genuine me."
> "But in your absence, buying vials purporting to be yours, it seems I cannot have unquestioning confidence."
> "Prove all the vials; trust those which are true." (70-71)

The herb-doctor's strategy here is a model of malicious epistemological inversion with his own character emerging as a monument to divinely inspired terrorism. His invocation of the concept of a watermark and its attendant misleading implications illuminates the degree to which he mirrors the actual presence of an epistemological malleability permitting the fabrication of a surface appearance of certainty while simultaneously betraying telltale signs of a subterranean realm of potentially devastating imprecision.

The precarious and indeed threatening nature of the herb-doctor's display of epistemological juggling is apparent in the ironic association of a watermark with the notion of "confidence", a term singled out for skeptical treatment perhaps more than any other in the Melville lexicon.

A watermark, in the simplest sense, is an inscription of authenticity, a visible sign effectively guaranteeing that a particular item under examination is precisely what it appears to be and that this correspondence between

appearance and reality is both accessible and self-evident. Situated against the backdrop of Melville's pervasive and consistent epistemology of Humean indeterminacy, the herb-doctor's suggestion that claims to certainty are even remotely possible must be viewed as necessarily ironic; this predicament only worsens when the watermark in question is moved into close proximity to confidence, a state of mind primarily characterized by a willingness to suspend doubt. In the Melvillean sphere this is tantamount to a self-induced coma begging to be exploited. Thus it is the presence of the watermark as a powerfully ironic symbol which filters and defines for the reader the specific nature of the con-man's agenda.

With this in mind the herb-doctor's rhetoric predictably exposes within language a class of indeterminacy complementing that which is already detectable in the external world through the application of a Humean perspective. A case in point is the herb-doctor's solemn assertion that his target should have little if any difficulty distinguishing "genuine" medicine from that which is "counterfeit". Since the reader (though not the target) can recognize the entire procedure to be a fraud, it is apparent that the herb-doctor's hapless victim is being asked to seek out the "genuine" counterfeit as opposed to the merely counterfeit. The consumptive target's confusion suggests a state of affairs within which the stability

insuring the possibility for irony is absent. More importantly the herb-doctor's selection of contradictory terms indicates that signification is so devoid of effectiveness that one is free to invert terms with impunity. Who could ever tell what an utterance actually conveys? Thus the target is further urged to "prove" his vials in search of those which are "true" while keeping a close watch for the herb-doctor's "genuine me".

When it is noted that after a prolonged conversation with the con-man the prospective target's engagement with language (both his own and that of his exploiter) has resulted in multiple failures of recognition, it is difficult to overlook the possibility that this encounter illustrates the kind of indeterminacy implied within the notion of dissemination. If language honed to a reasonably sharp edge fails to connect with the herb-doctor's credentials as a "genuine" fraud and provides no inkling whatsoever that the medication in question is too ambiguously constituted to be worth purchasing, these factors combined with the con-man's arrogant reliance on actual contradiction portray signification as a hopelessly scattered exercise, one in which signifiers can never be trusted to hit their mark. This becomes one of numerous instances in the novel characterized by"... "a language play that points to the insubstantiality of systems, to the

groundlessness in reaction to which systems are a cosmetic effort at containment" (Sussman 34).

Paralleling this particular form of indeterminacy is the more insidious Humean predicament suggesting that the root cause of difficulty here is the question of existence. Viewed from the angle of Hume's epistemology the symbol of the watermark which actually fails to authenticate the herb-doctor's Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator expands in its significance when one considers the nature of the authenticity which it has been employed to subvert.

For Hume, it will be recalled, impressions and the ideas which function as paler replicas of these impressions constitute the most fundamental building blocks of human experience. However, it is important to note that in Hume's scheme of things one cannot have impressions and ideas of "objects". Instead one merely has ideas of qualities or attributes which one later ascribes to an alleged object. If "ideas" in the Humean sense can never be said to disclose objects, then objects can never be said with certainty to actually exist.

Returning to the herb-doctor's watermark of confidence it now becomes apparent that its association with the term "genuine" is particularly resonant. Not only has the symbol's ironic use undermined the nature of the elixir as a "genuine" medication but its Humean underpinnings have raised the question of how one would go about deciding that

something is "genuinely" there, that something could be said to exist in a manner capable of being understood.

Supporting this line of thought is the con-man's inability to clarify for his target precisely how vials of his Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator can be "proven" or safely verified. This failure firmly establishes through implication the presence of an essentially Humean epistemology. For Hume proof that some concrete object actually exists in the external world would rest upon one's willingness to trust notions such as extension, body and causal relations. Impressions and ideas, however, fail to substantiate the reliability of each of these. Extension, for example, is unsafely derived from impressions of color and tangibility (38-39). One can also never discuss the nature or internal operations of a "body" (an actual object) because all of the ideas about any such alleged entity derive from impressions whose purview, in the strict sense, is the realm of appearances (64). Thus all which can be subjected to speculation are those matters producing some effect upon the problematic senses. Finally, causal relations suggest some sort of necessary connection amongst impressions which cannot be validated by these same impressions (75-76,87). It therefore comes as no surprise that the herb-doctor, despite his rhetorical talents, is unable to generate an experience of proof. The Humean haze

of which he is an exemplary manifestation precludes all such efforts.

Having unearthed this epistemological perspective it is now evident that Melville has maintained its consistency through successive, disguised presentations by continuing to depend upon invocations of various components of the structural pattern under examination in this thesis. The herb-doctor's repellent sales pitch to the helpless consumptive, for example, embodies not only the sub-themes of accident and preference but it also engages itself with the riddle of definition as applied to characters who cannot successfully carry out acts of definition as well as those whose constitution resists such definition. The failure to determine with certainty what is "genuine" and what can be subjected to exercises in proof effectively suggests that the elixir along with the con-man and his target have been shifted into the nebulous region of unrelated impressions, the region of the accidental.

On the level of character, however, the herb-doctor displays, much like his earlier avatars, the sort of mirrored constitution whose workings are just ambiguous enough to blur the distinction between what would normally pass for consistency and the sheer arbitrariness of preference. In adapting himself to whatever he believes his targets will find most palatable, the con-man exemplifies that mysterious disposition still hardly understood beyond

the invocation of the term "psychopath". Given the status of Melville's epistemology within **The Confidence-Man**, however, there appears to be an implication that every conscious agent in some respects inhabits a similarly shadowed landscape. Riddled as the world of the Fidèle is with Humean indeterminacy, intangibles such as identity and intentions are permanently obstructed from view. The con-man's psychopathy is thus in part emblematic of a general condition of epistemological privation and it is here that Melville's invocation of non-defining and indefinable characters emerges more clearly.

These components of the structural pattern under examination can be approached in this particular instance from two perspectives. In the most straightforward sense the herb-doctor's confused victim is portrayed as incapable of carrying out an act of definition or understanding in a situation whose dangerous consequences could only be averted by insight. Complementing this character's occlusions is his exploiter's seemingly unnoticed, strategic maneuverings suggesting the presence of a force thoroughly hidden within the hazy fabric of the Fidèle's world.

A second perspective, however, is suggested by a consideration of the pervasiveness of epistemological indeterminacy aboard the Fidèle. Consistent with the spread of disorienting whiteness throughout the ship and its association with a near ubiquitous agent of the Almighty is

an equally poisonous and uncontrollable paralysis of judgment. It would therefore seem to be reasonable to conclude that at this stage of Melville's epistemology non-defining and indefinable characters have been virtually conflated, illustrating that "knowledge" of whatever could be called a "self" has become as precarious as the effort to glimpse the intentions of other alleged conscious agents. The Fidèle, contrary to other vessels of its type, is in danger of evaporating.

The herb-doctor, however, does possess (much like his predecessors) certain talents conspicuously absent from the repertoire of his targets. One of these is an unerring facility for manipulating the epistemological gaps to be found in whatever could be termed the actual state of affairs. Where others almost invariably fumble he emerges relatively composed. An irregularity of such significance suggests a certain privileged status, one whose relation to the secret operations of the universe indicates that the con-man is "...carrying out God's own malicious purposes" (Thompson 305).

Evidence in support of this position is almost always rendered more credible by the con-man's propensity for self-incrimination. The herb-doctor proves not to be disappointing in this regard. In his initial encounter with Pitch, perhaps the most vigilant of the Fidèle's passengers,

his attempt to deflect an unexpectedly effective skepticism results in the loss of precious camouflage.

> In the calumniated name of nature, I present you with this box; my venerable friend here has a similar one; but to you, a free gift, sir. Through her regularly authorized agents, of whom I happen to be one, Nature delights in benefiting those who most abuse her. Pray, take it. (94)

For some an assertion of this nature on the part of the con-man would be viewed merely as fatuous. However, the cirumstantial evidence pointing toward the accuracy of his words is worthy of consideration.

It has already been noted that the Nature within which the novel's events transpire is one characterized by a corrosive ambiguity which endangers all of its inhabitants. When it is noted that one particular personage is evidently familiar enough with its operations to fluidly manipulate them for his own purposes while remaining relatively safe, it is prudent to infer that expertise of this type is directly related to Nature's auspices. The herb-doctor, contrary to his targets, lives somewhere within the interstices of the Fidèle's white world, somewhere behind or beyond that war zone of indeterminacy having no maps.

Arising out of this possibility is the question of the con-man's and Nature's ultimate disposition. Clarification of this state of affairs thus hinges upon how one views the con-man's agenda aboard the Fidèle and the matter of his trustworthiness as a character. When one realizes that no

one else exercises such competence amidst epistemological fragmentation it becomes evident that any attributes ascribed to the con-man will be equally applicable to Nature.

The herb-doctor, like his earlier avatars, has devoted his energy and skills exclusively to the purpose of exploitation. The victim to whom he has sold what he alternately calls his Omni Balsamic Reinvigorator and his Samaritan Pain Dissuader is presumably a consumptive already near death. The gesture of cheating such a helpless figure out of his paltry savings while promising what will never come to pass is tantamount to giving the man an extra shove into the grave. Since this is Nature's "authorized agent", the authority residing behind him is surely to be feared. It is in this manner that Melville introduces his concept of God with respect to the herb-doctor, a concept noted by Elizabeth Foster.

> ...Melville seems to say that...he would be tempted to figure Him [God], not as the loving Father of Christian belief, not as the benevolent Creator of the Deists, not as some Arnoldian stream of tendency that makes for righteousness, but as a jokester, perhaps malevolent...(Foster XV)

If the con-man can consistently succeed at making epistemological ambiguity support his subversive activities while everyone surrounding him is mired in hopeless confusion, it requires little imagination to speculate that such rare insight into the nature of things is an attribute

of an agent who is a mirror image of that which he so adroitly and lethally wields as a weapon. It is in this sense that the herb-doctor's psychopathy ceases to be an emblem of epistemological privation and becomes instead an evocation of the quintessential predator. And if Nature's "authorized" agent is a psychopathic predator one can only conclude that the God presiding over such a calculated disaster is equally psychopathic, equally malicious in having marooned humanity in a world whose ambiguities are designed to perpetuate a degree of suffering bordering on the unbearable. Safety, it seems, is least possible in the vicinity of God's emissary.

Perhaps the most refined depiction of epistemological indeterminacy and the consequent weaponry which permits God's agent to wage a ceaseless war against his human targets is embodied in the portrayal of the con-man's seventh avatar, the so-called representative of the Philosophical Intelligence Office. In this figure's confrontation with Pitch, the Missourian skeptic, the reader collides with all which is at stake in the ambiguities mined throughout the Fidèle's white boundaries.

> "Look you, as I told that cousin-german of yours, the herb-doctor, I'm now on the road to get me made some sort of machine to do my work. Machines for me. My cider-mill- does that ever steal my cider? My mowing- machine - does that ever lay a-bed mornings? My corn-husker - does that ever give me in- solence? No: cider-mill, mowing-machine, corn-husker - All faithfully attend to their business. Disinterested, too; no board, no wages; yet

> doing good all their lives long; shining examples that virtue is its own reward - the only practical Christians I know."
> "Oh dear, dear, dear, dear !"
> "Yes, sir: - boys?...what a difference, in a moral point of view, between a corn-husker and a boy! Sir, a corn-husker, for its patient continuance in well-doing, might not unfitly go to heaven. Do you suppose a boy will?"
> "A corn-husker in heaven! (turning up the whites of his eyes). Respected sir, this way of talking as if heaven were a kind of Washington patent-office museum - oh, oh, oh! - as if mere machine-work and puppet-work went to heaven -oh, oh, oh! Things incapable of free agency, to receive the eternal reward of well-doing -oh, oh, oh!" (99-100)

Encrypted within the seemingly outrageous humor of this exchange is a particularly shrewd attack on the con-man's attempted deployment of the line of reasoning which underlies institutionalized Christianity, reasoning shown to be all the less worthy of respect by virtue of its hidden malice and the degree to which it is at odds with Pitch's more authentic Humean perspective.

Indicative of this problematic collision is the question of why Pitch is so oddly attached to machines. Machines, after all, are designed in the belief that they facilitate in the development of higher levels of order and predictability. At first glance Pitch's posture appears to fly in the face of what has been, up to this point, the novel's relentless portrayal of a world simply too opaque to allow for any safe belief in order. In this light Pitch seems merely to be advocating a belief in one model of allegedly accessible order over another.

However, positioned as it is in the context of a discussion about the problematic trustworthiness of human behavior and the purported beneficence of the sort of divine plan to which the con-man appears to be alluding, the notion of cherished machines would seem most likely to be the ironic means by which Pitch is attempting to subvert his exploiter's sales pitch in the service of an unfounded confidence. Thus as an ironic or inverted symbol Pitch's invocation of superior mechanization is primarily an acknowledgment of the threat of undisclosed human motives and the desirability of limiting one's contact with this region of experience whenever possible. It is here that the structural components of the indefinable character and the related sub-theme of preference are shown to persist at least through implication. Pitch's assertions, humor aside, suggest a Humean stance toward the all too fluid notion of "self" while merely appearing to contradict Hume. Like his potential victimizer Pitch has proven crafty enough to hide within some of the shadows of rhetoric.

The damage inflicted by the machine's symbolic force, however, does not restrict itself to the boundaries demarcating the temporal world. In his statement that machines are "the only practical Christians" he has ever encountered, Pitch has raised surreptitiously the question of whether the gates to a paradise in which earthly injustices are allegedly rectified are actually locked to

all but pre-programmed automatons. This figurative probe travels dangerously far into what had previously been the con-man's safe terrain. Pitch's attack is thus double-barrelled, one aspect assaulting the suspiciously inverted reasoning which supports the con-man's (and by implication God's) advocacy of a Christian perspective while another questions the Almighty's motive for such an act of deception.

With respect to Pitch's first aim it is important to recall that in Melville's earlier work, most notably in "Benito Cereno", Christianity as an institutionalized body of ideas is represented as an elaborate reasoned model superimposed upon the workings of the universe as a virtual teleology, one whose failure to actually engage itself with lived experience is nothing short of disastrous. Not only can its tenets not be subjected to validation but human beings, insofar as they elude definition in a Humean fashion, cannot be said with any certainty ever to be living in a Christian manner. Thus Christianity (and by implication all systematic religious inquiry) emerges as a metaphor for the extreme distortions of reason, at least with respect to its claim to be able to explain what is actually the case. Pitch's reference to machines as "practical Christians" in this light is seen to trigger the means by which the reason which underlies Christianity is revealed to be absurd. As in the case of Capt. Delano

anyone aboard the Fidèle who would seriously adopt the PIO man's views would be subcribing "...ultimately [to] a metaphysical category implying a relation of optimism and unquestioning belief" (Sussman 49). When one considers that it is precisely such a suspension of doubt which leads to and in fact fosters manipulation within the world of the Fidèle, the Christian worldview emerges as one whose degree of inaccuracy is a palpable threat.

Pitch's strategy of underscoring the instability of Christianity's reasoning is quite consistent here with Hume's portrayal of reasoning as a precarious exercise. Hume, for example, stresses that notions such as time (36-37), body (64) and causation (75-76, 87) are not subject to proofs precisely because they originate in reason's collaboration with ambiguous passions rather than in impressions. In the Melvillean scheme institutionalized religion is vulnerable in a like manner.

Accompanying this surface tactic weapons of a more concealed and powerful nature can be found in Pitch's assertion that corn-huskers and mowing-machines are the most devout of Christians. One must bear in mind that having constituted a seemingly fragmented universe from which epistemological safety has been eradicated, God has dispatched an agent whose words and attitude are meant to elicit a belief in those things which are no longer achievable. In speaking of "free agency" and "eternal

reward" the representative of the Philosophical Intelligence Office mimicks the Christian mindset which the more prevalent Humean state of affairs renders beyond validation. Most telling, however, is the likelihood that God and the con-man are fully aware of this predicament. God in fact was presumably in a position at the moment of creation to insure that matters of teleological and theological truth would be self-evident. Since such a measure was never taken as a means of sparing the Fidèle's passengers unnecessary suffering, the con-man's claim that there exists a heaven in which all such things are worked out to everyone's final benefit emerges as a contradiction. If this is the case one must then ask if God would have any reason for perpetrating such a state of affairs beyond that of deliberate deception. It is through this line of thought that Pitch's remarks on the subject of boys and machines can be seen to link Humean indeterminacy to divine malice.

In suggesting that his corn-husker could gain entry to heaven with greater ease than a boy, Pitch is alluding in a subversive fashion to the fact that the assumptions at work in the con-man's argument only serve to incriminate both the con-man and God. Amidst suspiciously pervasive opacity there cannot be said to exist enough certainty to posit free agency and eternal reward. However, this indeterminacy is implied to be the result of God's orchestration. Chaos has been planned so thoroughly and so relentlessly that it has

killed anything worthy of the name "freedom". Thus salvation and damnation are effectively beyond human control. Membership in God's "heaven" could only be achieved by someone or something intended to arrive there from the first moment of his/her/its existence - an entity virtually indistinguishable from a "machine". God already knows who will be saved and most prominent among these is the con-man. This is surely one reason why this particular avatar is jarred to the point of rolling his eyes and weakly muttering "...oh,oh,oh!" (100). God's swindler has been trapped in dangerously close proximity to the fissures in his favorite saintly shield.

To escape the unforeseen glare of Pitch's skeptical probe the PIO man weaves ever more untenable defences. One of these hinges upon the trustworthiness of the concept of potentiality.

> "Well, sir, if you will permit me, in my small way, to speak for you, you remark, respected sir, an incipient creation; loose sort of sketchy thing; a little preliminacy rag-paper study, or careless cartoon, so to speak, of a man. The idea, you see, respected sir, is there; but, as yet, wants filling out. In a word, respected sir, the man-child is at present but little, everyway; I don't pretend to deny it, but, then, he promises well, does he not? Yes, promises very well indeed, I may say... But, to advance one step further... we must now drop the figure of the rag-paper cartoon, and borrow one... from the horticultural kingdom. Some bud, lily-bud, if you please... The man-child... now our horticultural image comes into play - like the bud of the lily, he contains concealed rudiments of others: that

> is, points at present invisible, with beauties at present dormant."
> "Come, come, this talk is getting too horticultural and beautiful altogether. Cut it short!" (105)

From the passage above it is evident that the PIO man wishes to curtail Pitch's capacity to explore the vulnerability of the concept being invoked. It is interesting that the child is not referred to in the initial stages of the conversation as a "potential" man despite the fact that this is the most straightfoward term to characterize the actual topic of discussion. "Potential", however, would draw one's attention a little too drastically toward that which currently cannot be said to be present. Instead the con-man coyly attempts to occlude Pitch's perspective by defining the child as an "incipient creation" and a "preliminary...study". Both of these terms effectively restrict one's focus to what is given. It is through this subtle sleight of hand that the notion of potentiality is permitted to gain entry to the realm of the seemingly observable.

The reasoning facilitating this maneuver, however, is precarious insofar as it mimicks the weaknesses of induction while exhibiting none of its strenghts. It is the product of inductive reasoning, for example, to conclude that if a given state of affairs has consistently prevailed in the past, it will also prevail in the future. Hume, however, held to the opinion that since the underlying causes of an

event can never adequately be known, one has no way of speculating about the likelihood of such an event ever occurring again (91). Induction was viewed to be unsafe.

Eroding a line of argument already seen to be barely standing, Pitch's exploiter audaciously suggests that the child seemingly constituted in one way in the here and now can no doubt be trusted to become something rather different but better in the future, something having the convenience to be "at present invisible". When it is further noted that his justification for such a view rests upon the invocation of an analogy from horticulture his peculiar parody of induction collapses beyond recall.

The significance of this collapse is not readily discernible. However, when it is noted that the con-man's intellectual mirage serves merely as a preamble to the suggestion that the child necessarily "promises well", reason once again appears to have taken on the shadings of religion. For the con-man things always promise well, disaster no doubt being the consequence of a momentary but never to be repeated lapse in the Almighty's attention span. This mindset, however fake on the part of God's agent, nonetheless replicates with disquieting precision what Melville views to be the tenuous nature of the Christian orientation. A body of essentially unverifiable ideas has been erected in defense of an equally unstable optimism. Thus in this passage reason and religion subvert each other.

A further matter crucial to this encounter is the question of error and its possible non-detection. The margin of this potential error is portrayed as vast and can be measured by how the PIO man accounts for the "concealed" and "invisible" qualities apparently residing within the child. The reasoning of religion first posits that these qualities are actually present and then suggests that they are worthy of trust.

Pitch's skepticism, consistent with Humean epistemology, cannot determine that these attributes of the future exist and this indeterminacy immediately escalates into a threat. If Pitch's position is regarded as more authentic, the con-man's strategy emerges as one of inversion, an attempt to transform threat into safety. In the Melvillean context such a disparity of possibilities, by virtue of the fact that it can persist in an unresolved manner and be subjected to ruthless manipulation, suggests that the actual state of affairs invites such sleight of hand. It insures, by design, the goals of God's agents and was therefore meant to be their safety net. Thus upon reflection this particular exchange between Pitch and the con-man is seen to engage itself with a number of the structural components employed in Melville's inquiry, most notably the metaphor of religion, the concept of a threatening God, the character eluding definition (both the

con-man and children) and finally the character unable to define adequately (Pitch).

Suspicious of what the tenuous assumptions at work in the field of horticulture could possibly reveal about the human condition, Pitch shrewdly subverts the one component of the PIO man's veneer of insight unable to withstand examination, the assertion that analogy constitutes valid argumentation.

> "But is analogy argument? You are a punster." "Punster, respected sir?" with a look of being aggrieved. "Yes, you pun with ideas as another man may with words." "Oh well, sir, whoever talks in that strain, whoever has no confidence in human reason, whoever despises human reason, in vain to reason with him. Still, respected sir," altering his air, "permit me to hint that, had not the force of analogy moved you somewhat, you would hardly have offered to contemn it." (107)

Despite maintaining the appearances of a straightforward accusation and its accompanying response, this passage exhibits a degree of maneuvering which illustrates the ease with which any exchange can lapse into an unexpectedly dangerous game of ping-pong. Pitch's contention that analogy is in fact not argument in any acceptable sense is well taken but it is clear that his bald statement is issued from within the context of a perspective undermining the possibility of employing reason to redefine the universe in an optimistically systematic fashion. In this light his pronouncement on the subject of analogy

suggests that reasoning is so inadequate that it can only generate the semblance of validity by invoking something as tenuous as an analogy. Thus the failure of the con-man's horticultural analogy (considering its relation to the metaphor of religion) is emblematic of the ultimate precariousness of all of reason's operations, a position not unlike that of Hume.

The con-man, at this point, can be expected to have already situated his potential victim's remarks accurately. This would explain in part why he so hastily abandons one line of questionable argument (that of analogy) only to find himself occupying the even more problematic region of the ad hominem argument.

In asserting that it is "vain to reason" with Pitch God's agent is resurrecting the old adage that if reason is against a man, a man will be against reason. This is ostensibly why Pitch "despises" reason. However, upon closer examination it is evident that the con-man is attempting to hustle Pitch into what is essentially a no-win situation. On the one hand it is suggested that he opposes reason merely because it contradicts his preferred beliefs. The con-man seems to be indicating here that Pitch no doubt is aware of his own wrongheadedness but simply lacks the ccurage to acknowledge his victimizer's superiority. Thus he "despises" whatever he cannot defeat.

Immediately following upon this strategy is the further implication that anyone who refuses to see reason is either too stupid or demented to be taken seriously. With Pitch suitably shoved into the position of having to define himself exclusively in terms of cowardice, idiocy or lunacy the con-man feels free to conclude with tongue-in-cheek that his own reasoning must be correct and it is through this means that he eventually anaesthetizes Pitch long enough to sell him the services of a worker.

However, it is important to note that since argument as demonstrated by the PIO man is virtually impossible in the war zone which characterizes the Fidèle, his charges against Pitch emerge as ironies which unexpectedly backfire. The term "despises", for example, reveals as much about its user as it allegedly does about its target. Unable to establish the substantiveness of his case well enough to forestall for more then a few minutes repeated skeptical responses from Pitch, the PIO man opts for self-incriminating rhetorical overkill. Even his final statement in the passage quoted above unravels readily. In maintaining that Pitch never would have condemned his line of thought if it had not proved to be particularly moving, the con-man is laying claim to greater insight into the workings of other minds than those minds themselves. Disagreement, it seems, is actually symptomatic of agreement. Contradiction has become

inescapable for him and so the con-man has good reason to be "aggrieved".

Here as elsewhere the operations of language are problematic. The fact that the con-man can hide periodically (but not for long) within the shadows of possibly concealed or misunderstood word plays illustrates that terms such as "despises reason" are deflective and not fully subject to anyone's control. This suggests an indeterminacy within a language which finds itself already within an indeterminate world. Thus the non-defining character, the character who cannot be defined and his relation in turn to the sub-theme of preference continue to suggest their presence in Melville's play of "...parabolic meanings...shifted beyond their focus" (Foster XIX).

Despite his momentary exploitation at the hands of the PIO man, Pitch can be said in a broader context to have gained an ascendancy over God's emissary unequalled by any other target. This is most evident when one examines Pitch's strategy in dealing with the assertion that one can claim to have knowledge of the private thoughts of others, even the thoughts of a figure who expired in the Dark Ages.

> "To shift the subject, since we cannot agree. Pray, what is your opinion, respected sir, of St.Augustine?"
> "St.Augustine? What should I, or you either, know of him? Seems to me, for one in such a business, to say nothing of such a coat, that though you don't know a great deal, indeed, yet you know a good deal more than you ought to know, or than you have a right to know, or than it is safe or expedient for you to know,

> or than, in the fair course of life, you could have honestly come to know. I am of opinion...this knowledge of yours, which you haven't enough knowledge to know how to make a right use of it, it should be taken from you. And so I have been thinking all along." (108-109)

In soliciting Pitch's opinion of St.Augustine it would seem more than likely that the PIO man is alluding quite subtly to Augustine's alleged transition from a life of sin to one of saintliness, a transition originating in something of a visionary experience. The problem which arises from consideration of this matter proves to be illustrative of what lies at the very center of Humean epistemology.

When Pitch poses the question of what can be known of St. Augustine he is also raising through implication the far more heretical question of how anyone could go about determining with certainty that Augustine actually underwent the mystical experience which he claimed for himself. Being one kind of person at one moment Augustine evidently became quite a different person at another moment. Were there two of him or one? Upon reflection this problem is seen to be indistinguishable from Hume's difficulty with respect to multiple impressions of what is believed to be one continuous object.

Augustine, viewed from this ironic angle, is a paradigm of Humean experience, a symbol of that indeterminacy no longer conceivable for Melville in the absence of baleful theological connotations. Thus Augustine serves to demolish

a cornerstone of Christian theology. He has become the character who eludes definition and his ironic invocation by a similarly constituted predatory figure places him uncomfortably close to the shadow of one other structural component within Melville's epistemology, that of a malicious deity.

Not for the first time God's orchestrated indeterminacy has caused the con-man's reliance on the weapon of religious thought to backfire. Pitch will not allow God to restore conveniently with one hand what was taken away irrevocably with another. Thus it is fitting that Pitch should establish the focus on the subject of knowledge in the temporal world and that which should be "taken" away.

> The drastic aim of Melville's comedy of thought is to bring into question the sheer possibility of clear thinking itself - of "knowing" anything. The aim is a sort of intellectual derangement, by arousing and deploying...the terrible doubt of appearances;
> doubt every which way;...Out of...particular ...doubts there gradually arise the more fateful ones, those which shake our foundations:...doubt about the benevolence of God and of nature...(Lewis 265-266)

Given the Humean characteristics of the world inhabited by Pitch, doubt and suspicion render it virtually impossible to endorse the PIO man's implied claims to knowledge with respect to the experience of conscious agents. As R.W.B. Lewis has illustrated, the Fidèle is a world without clarity and thus within its boundaries invocations of mysterious religious transformations and their alleged connection to a

clearly accessible and beneficent heavenly agenda must be "taken" away in Pitch's terms.

There remains a sense, however, in which the con-man is in possession of specialized knowledge. Pitch's sarcasm alludes to this state of affairs when he observes that his exploiter seems to know "a good deal more" than he should. It is here that the con-man's status as God's agent is invoked by Melville. The temporal world may be corroded by indeterminacy but God's world is no doubt very precisely defined and accessible to those assigned the responsibility of carrying out its war games. The con-man and his master live in a realm of unseen levers which insure divine safety while perpetuating human frustration and defeat. Beyond the Fidèle's whiteness, in the "safe" city of God, there is no doubt or pain and consequently there is also no pity, no remission in the drive to terrorize.

It is with the appearance of the eighth and final avatar of the con-man that some of the most prominent features of Melville's epistemology are shown most fully to be endemic not only to the very nature of this figure but more importantly to the tilt of the specific teleology over which he presides. Even before speaking the Cosmopolitan (or Frank Goodman as he calls himself) is associated with the symbolic significance of the color spectrum.

> In short, the stranger sported a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating

> of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse; from its plaited sort of front peeped glimpses of a flowered regatta-shirt, while, for the rest, white trousers of ample duck flowed over maroon-colored slippers, and a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple crowned him off at top; king of traveled good fellows,evidently.(114)

Tailored in what at first appears to be a harmlessly outlandish rainbow of colors, the Cosmopolitan is the overt manifestation of something which his previous avatars signalled in a far more concealed fashion. The man in cream-colors, it will be recalled, boarded the Fidèle in white while his next avatar appeared at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum as Black Guinea. Occupying the middle range are such figures as the man in grey and the herb-doctor in his "snuff-colored surtout"(65). With the Cosmopolitan appearing to represent a sweeping summation of these diverse frequencies or bands a question of tailoring has been linked symbolically to the "colorless all-color" of **Moby-Dick**'s whale (296) as well as to the rainbow invoked within **Billy Budd** (479) as a means of questioning the degree to which anything can ever actually be understood safely.

The con-man's close connection to shifting colors, one already cited by Alan Lebowitz (190-191), thus serves not only as an indication that Melville's evolving epistemology continues to rely upon the recurrence of specific structural components, but beyond this it suggests that the whiteness which lies at the heart of the rainbow's significance and its application to a spectrum of epistemological

possibilities have been moved into the realm of conscious agency as well as into God's realm via a divine agent.

A number of considerations arise from this. As was noted earlier Humean impressions are constituted in such a way that each is disconnected from every other, raising questions about whether successive impressions denote one object, many objects or possibly no object.

Glancing at the Cosmopolitan's "regal" colors and the diverse shades of his predecessors it would seem quite clear that colors have symbolically taken on the role of Humean impressions, generating similar problems concerning appearance and reality. Are there eight con-men or merely one? When one color disappears into the crowd and is replaced by some other color seemingly quite well disguised, who or what, precisely, is being encountered? More to the point, in an environment poisoned by such instability can it be said in absolute terms that one is encountering anything whatsoever? The figure of the con-man, despite his remarkable talents, has become, by virtue of his symbolic association with color, a paradigm of Humean indeterminacy, the breathing and thinking embodiment of a lethal threat originating at the moment of creation.

With this perspective in mind the reader's difficulty in ascertaining with certainty whether there are numerous con-men or merely one can be viewed as a precise register of the disorientation afflicting the Fidèle's passengers. This

disorientation is so unremitting that the con-man, hiding within the epistemological and ontological ramifications of color shifts understood only by God and himself, can frequently allude with impunity to the actual state of affairs while simultaneously courting self-incrimination. In his conversation with the barber, for example, the Cosmopolitan states, "You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form, barber" (193). When one bears in mind that this de facto warning is issued while the barber is being softened for an imminent fleecing, the Cosmopolitan's arrogance suggests that the world of the Fidèle is mired in "...a whole rhetoric of confusion about absolute and relative Truth, that which unequivocably should be so and that which most equivocally is so" (Lee, "Voices"162).

Typical of the Fidèle's passengers the barber proves incapable of recognizing those utterances of the con-man which convey something of the latter's intentions and nature as well as something of the external world's problematic operations. This in turn would appear to suggest the pervasive presence of a deconstructive bind within language which precludes the possibility of ever connecting with something beyond a rapidly moving signifier. The question of referents, as implied by A. Robert Lee above, has evaporated.

Language aside, however, it is also clear that the barber's participation in the external world has been of

such a fragmented kind that any effort to glimpse the outline of this fragmentation as urged by the Cosmopolitan results in failure. The threat which underlies Humean indeterminacy, as the con-man well knows, can only be grasped adequately by someone not forced to reside exclusively in such a world. Thus as the Cosmopolitan proceeds to unleash some of the Almighty's most malicious ploys, one can see that the development of Melville's epistemology continues to rely heavily upon the relevance of the character who defies adequate definition as well as the one incapable of doing the defining.

The most significant revelations (for the reader) to emerge from the con-man's own lips are seen to transpire most appropriately on the occasion of the Cosmopolitan's encounter with God's most formidable target, the skeptical Pitch.

> "To you, an Ishmael, disguising in sportiveness my intent, I came ambassador from the human race, charged with the assurance that for your mislike they bore no answering grudge, but sought to conciliate accord between you and them. Yet you take me not for the honest envoy, but I know not what sort of unheard-of spy. Sir," he less lowly added, "this mistaking of your man should teach you how you may mistake all men. For God's sake," laying both hands upon him, "get you confidence."(120)

Relegating Pitch to the status of an Ishmael the Cosmopolitan's tactic is to portray opposition as the result of a disreputable flaw. The invocation of Ishmael in this

context is designed to suggest the presence of the sort of willful misanthropic disposition worthy only of contempt. Despite Pitch's aversion to kinship, however, it is the con-man who simulates a disarming and all too flexible sense of kinship merely to betray humanity whenever an opportunity arises, thereby revealing a misanthropic orientation of an entirely different category. The con-man, not for the first time, exhibits a near pathological propensity for ascribing his own traits to others.

Ishmael's poetic significance, however, does not end here. As noted in part one of chapter one this figure has made an appearance on three prior occasions within Melville's work: in **Moby-Dick**, "The Two Temples"(156) and **Pierre**(115-116). Each of these evocations has portrayed an alienation difficult to construe as villainous.

Against this Melvillean backdrop the Cosmopolitan's ad hominem remark only serves to validate Pitch's attitude. This particular Ishmael is also a sole survivor, one who minimized the coercion instigated by God and an unrelenting agent. Like his predecessor in **Moby-Dick** he is stranded without bearings in an epistemological landscape allowing for no absolute verification and thus no ties to other people or things. Pitch is a Humean pariah and in having been the recipient of such a pre-determined fate he is also a victim.

Keeping this in mind the Cosmopolitan's subsequent statements in the same passage provide the most telling revelation in the novel about the operations of God's unseen domain. Vaguely suspicious of Pitch's unexpectedly persistent suspicion, the Cosmopolitan misjudges what he thought to be safe terrain and pushes matters a little too far. The result is a paranoid tantrum on the subject of spying which somehow doesn't adhere to its intended target. Accusation has become unwittingly a confession, certainly to the reader if not to Pitch.

The term "spy" is an especially potent one and as its epistemological and theological ramifications are examined it will become clear that this notion is effectively the linchpin of Melvillean epistemology. Whatever went wrong at Creation owed its existence to what would become the lasting shadow of someone's or something's need for eavesdropping.

Spying, it is said, is a form of warfare. Be that as it may, in actual practice it is an attempt to acquire covertly the knowledge about some other party which cannot be gotten by a more straightforward means without compromising one's own safety. When one notes that Melville's and Hume's skepticism are such that their shared epistemology is one of knowledge denied, spying is already seen to possess an incipient relevance.

However, upon closer scrutiny it is the convergence of spying and the inaccessibility of knowledge which unearths

an echo of the first recorded case of eavesdropping, that of Adam in the garden of Eden. In attempting to gain access to the tree of knowledge Adam was encroaching upon God's territory by carrying out through a virtual act of espionage the very inquiry or epistemological investigation which had been prohibited inexplicably by the overt nature of his relationship with God. Surprisingly it would appear that God had somehow always anticipated such a contingency since the fact that Adam was caught strongly suggests that God was already spying on him. The appropriately Melvillean question which one might pose here is that of why such a peculiar state of affairs was ever deemed to be necessary. Prior to his creation Adam could not have been consulted on the matter of whether he wished to be disposed toward the sort of curiosity possessing little possibility of remaining latent. God, on the other hand, (given the context of Christian myth) was omnipotent and thus presumably in a position to bestow upon humanity something more than a fractured teleology. In any event God proved to be a more practiced spy than Adam and as a consequence humanity's failure to acquire knowledge in Eden was never subject to rectification. The first exposure to God was, in effect, the paradigmatic trigger of the structural inescapability of spying in the divine scheme of things, and the recoil of this condition can still be felt in what is viewed by Melville as humanity's persistent fallen state.

If one accepts for a moment the hypothesis that the account of the Fall is open to such an interpretation, an inference encouraged by the behavior of God's agents in the novel, it is immediately evident that the dynamics of the predicament described above are mirrored with great precision within The Confidence-Man. Just as Adam's efforts to achieve understanding were defeated by a superior consciousness whose vigilance and apparent incapacity to forgive were the embodiment of what some might consider to be cosmic malice, it is clear that the epistemological chaos which pervades the Fidèle owes its permanence to the constant, disruptive presence of God's agents in the temporal world. If one could speculate that the Fall was initially attributable to a de facto act of spying, then original sin was the sin of spying. The only problem with this is that God was apparently already committing the same sin against Adam. Adam's sin was that of spying on a spy. Regrettably what was deemed appropriate for God was deemed fatal for anyone else. It is in the light of ironies such as this and the con-man's frequent unintended statements of self-incrimination that Lawrence Thompson's view of this figure as "...the agent of that truly Original Sinner, God Almighty"(327) is shown to be especially insightful.

When the Cosmopolitan unwittingly provides evidence of being a spy, this admission, viewed in the context already discussed, is little short of staggering since, in

replication of the events which transpired in Eden, it suggests that knowledge in the Humean sense is non-existent within the human condition because God wishes humanity to undergo a requisite degree of privation. The ongoing success of this divine agenda has been assured, in the true spirit of original sin, by delegating to certain favored agents the responsibility of generating just enough chaos to forestall any possibility of achieving the safety of certainty. God's own safety rests upon humanity's continued ignorance, surely one reason why the con-man's fifth avatar, Mr. Truman, advocates a cessation (as the narrator states) "...of philosophizing...since this might beget an indiscreet habit of thinking and feeling which might unexpectedly betray [one] upon unsuitable occasions"(56). Probing, however haphazard an exercise, might conceivably unsettle the balance required to perpetuate a war game waged relentlessly throughout human history. The only good target is one with no chance of ever winning.

Just as the Cosmopolitan's spying alluded to the paradigmatic mindset of spying which characterized God's creation of humanity and consequently insured the eventual evolution in the Melvillean sense of an epistemological state effectively indistinguishable from Humean indeterminacy, it is also possible to speculate that the Creation myth, when examined in the manner suggested by

Melville, implicitly reveals why language operates as it does within the world of the Fidèle.

Crucial to this matter is the likehood (in the context of the myth and Melville's implied view of it) that God had to have already been spying on Adam long before Adam ever wandered from the path of virtue. This immediately raises not only the question of determinism discussed elsewhere in this thesis but also the question of any possible duplicity on the part of God and what this might be said to imply with regard to God's word or believability.

Adam's tenure in Eden, however brief, could not have endured in the absence of some sort of overt relationship with God. In the pre-fallen world humanity had not yet been removed from God's sight. Adam therefore possessed the luxury, if the myth is taken at face value, of communing directly with the Almighty at least on the one occasion when he was informed of what he could or could not do in order to maintain his continued residency. Adam's part of the bargain entailed the promise that no effort would be made to transgress the territory of the tree of knowledge.

Implicit here, however, is the realization that every bargain or promise is made between two parties. If Adam promised to respect the boundaries of the tree of knowledge, it could only have been because God had provided him with an adequate incentive, that being a reciprocal promise not to

eject him from Paradise. The question here is whether God's promise was sufficiently informative.

In issuing a promise to Adam, God, in the implied Melvillean reading of this situation, gave His/Her/Its word while just happening to omit any reference to the fact that Adam was predisposed to be curious, to spy on his Creator. Of course, at this point the Creator was already watching Adam, waiting for a mistake which an omniscient being would not await were the mistake not inevitable. The first lie was thus told by God. It was a lie or sin of omission. God's "word", in all its connotations, was at its heart a lie or vacuum, a deferral of truth making it impossible for Adam to gain safe access to what God's word actually represented. One could speculate that Adam was working with a language suitably doctored by God to appear acceptable while its various referents had evaporated. The God whom Adam believed and thus whose disposition he believed was accessible through the "word" of God had disappeared leaving little but a trace.

With the Cosmopolitan's subtle resurrection of the Creation myth it is now possible to recognize the degree to which the events which transpire aboard the Fidèle are implied to mirror the beginnings of human existence even with respect to the operations of discourse. In **The Confidence-Man**, as A. Robert Lee has stated,

> The very medium of language, however brilliantly deployed (or precisely by being

> brilliantly deployed), comes back to a Chinese-box waywardness, words as ever inescapably self-referential and parasitic upon their own being. Thus the greater the confidence in all and every language-system the more reality goes on being fictionalized and mankind yet further detached from that overarching Melvillean desideratum, Truth.("Voices" 160)

It is with the convergence of God and the mundane events of the secular world that the linguistic problems associated with deconstruction referred to by Lee take on a more expanded significance. Original sin, as Lawrance Thompson has suggested, was more properly God's act of violation. The spying which illustrates a divine world hidden from a temporal one utterly riddled by fragmentation follows upon (not causally but sequentially) the prior untrustworthiness of God's "word". Adam's sin was pre-ordained by the flaws inhering in language created by God. Thus all knowledge was denied even before the Fall. Adam, in this sense, had always already fallen and it is this corrosive perspective which informs **The Confidence-Man**'s unique skepticism. In the exchange between the Cosmopolitan and Pitch it is therefore evident that the figure of Ishmael and the spy motif are the means of expanding Melville's concept of God, the structural component which looms largest in the second phase of Melvillean epistemology.

With threads of linguistic and overall epistemological indeterminacy tracked uninterruptedly back to God and the first moment of Creation, it is small wonder that the con-

man's various avatars have consistently positioned themselves within the protective cover of this network of shadows. This is most evident in their collective penchant for mimicking with untiring precision both the attitude and rhetoric of the so-called religious disposition. Thus the Cosmopolitan is predictably true to form when he moves in for one final act of betrayal aboard the Fidèle.

Swindlers select targets on the basis of one essential criterion, that of vulnerability to suggestion. The Cosmopolitan's target, it turns out, just happens to be reading the Bible, the word of God. The fact that this man is singled out above and beyond other passengers in his proximity indicates that the word of God is the con-man's choice weapon because of its percieved reliability. The language which one can infer to have generated a divine fleecing in Eden is not expected to be any less effective in the fallen world. Thus upon approaching the old man the Cosmopolitan, suitably named Frank "Goodman", adopts an air of pious kinship while glancing at his target's Bible and announcing, "And so you have good news there, sir - the very best of good news"(207).

Melville's irony here is particularly forceful. The Bible's presence, like a concealed toxin, radiates outwards and invisibly contaminates everything to which it is even vaguely linked. Its role as a perennially successful tool of duplicity dating back to the very origins of the universe

alludes to the epistemological status quo of insurmountable fragmentation, a hopelessness of inquiry illustrated quite shrewdly by the Bible's circular appearance in the hands of the man in cream-colors at the novel's very beginning and once again in the possession of the Cosmopolitan's last target.

Finally it would seem that the Bible also serves in this instance as an indicator of the far broader threat posed by the tendency to institutionalize religious reasoning (much like the reasoning in any discipline) in order to establish a neat and optimistic realm of order even at the cost of discarding pervasive opacity, a view touched upon by Tom Quirk (132). It is the old man's adherence to such a body of thought which guarantees his ruthless exploitation at the hands of God's agent. Thus Melville's deployment of the Bible, in suggesting the presence of the familiar metaphor of religion, undermines reasoning in general in much the same spirit in which Hume questioned the reliability of conclusions deriving from that faculty. The "good news" has become the worst news possible.

Frank Goodman's relation to "good news" is more readily apparent in a three-way exchange involving Goodman, the old man and a younger swindler muscling his way into God's arena. The younger con-man, not an associate of the Cosmopolitan, wishes to sell the latter's prospective target a "traveler's patent lock"(211). Realizing that his own

divinely ordained mission may be subverted by an unforeseen demonstration of the wisdom of suspicion, the Cosmopolitan seeks to sabotage the efforts of the young intruder by deflecting his questions on the notion of safety.

> "Look now, sir,...supposing this little door is your state-room door; well," opening it, "you go in for the night; you close your door behind you - thus. Now, is all safe?"
> "I suppose so, child," said the old man.
> "Of course it is, my fine fellow," said the cosmopolitan.
> "All safe. Well. Now, about two o'clock in the morning, say, a soft-handed gentleman comes softly and tries the knob here - thus;...
> presto! how comes on the soft cash?"
> "I see, I see, child," said the old man; "your fine gentleman is a fine thief and there's no lock to your little door..."
> "Well, now,"...producing a small steel contrivance...
> "There now," admiringly holding it off at arm's-length...
> "let that soft-handed gentleman... keep a'trying till he finds his head as soft as his hand."(211)

Although there would appear to be a likely possibility that the younger con-man's "patent lock" is ineffective, it is clear that his strategy of arousing fear contradicts that of the Cosmopolitan. Raising the possibility of threat would only serve to undermine the Cosmopolitan's need for malleable complacency and this surely accounts for the latter's quick but failed attempt to suggest that the old man's belongings are safe behind an unlocked door. The achievement of God's agenda is facilitated by illusions of safety maintained in a delicate, narcotic balance.

Most intriguing about this passage, however, is Melville's technique of linking safety to ignorance or the lack of knowledge. Both swindlers, after all, falsely claim to be providing the service of safety to someone whose state of disorientation renders serious judgment virtually impossible. When it is further considered that one of these fleecings is carried out by God's agent, the dark juxtaposition of safety, swindling, an absence of knowledge, God and unseen danger perfectly mirrors Melville's entire epistemology. The old man, at first cheated by a minor league crook, still accedes to the word of God and will now possibly be destroyed by what turns out to be the "unsafe" nature of the "good news" delivered by Frank Goodman.

Moving ever more rapidly through the psychopathic regions of the indefinable character, the Cosmopolitan, exemplifying the sub-theme of hidden preference, weakens his already helples, non-defining target with the predictable depiction of a universe pervaded by divine beneficence.

> "...I believe in a Committee of Safety, holding their silent sessions over all, in an invisible patrol, most alert when we soundest sleep, and whose beat lies as much through forests as towns, along rivers as streets. In short, I never forget that passage of Scripture which says, "Jehovah shall be thy confidence"."(215-216)

Still intent upon shoring up the damage perpetrated earlier by the lock salesman, the Cosmopolitan can't resist sanitizing the question of safety. True to form he practices epistemological inversion by adopting a Biblical

air with conspicuous ease. Given his goals the Committee of Safety must be viewed more properly as a star chamber perpetually in session dealing with the most crucial need to obliterate safety wherever and whenever it threatens to erupt, even if by accident. The fact that the Cosmopolitan's ploy remains plausible for the old man suggests once again that the divine agent's rhetoric is insufficiently anchored to any state of affairs that could be recognized as true or false, illustrating the broader Melvillean view that language is so ceaselessly self-referential that it is free to be manipulated with impunity. Humean and linguistic indeterminacy have effectively occluded the possibility of glimpsing the Almighty's frightening nearness.

Given what appear to be such elemental flaws within the structure of whatever could be called existence, it is only fitting that in the final moments of <u>The Confidence-Man</u> light is eradicated by darkness as the Cosmopolitan leads one last victim toward a brush with Providence.

> "Then, good-night, good-night; and Providence have both of us in its good keeping." "Be sure it will," eying the old man with sympathy, as for the moment he stood, money-belt in hand, and life-preserver under arm, "be sure it will, sir, since in Providence, as in man, you and I equally put trust. But, bless me, we are being left in the dark here. Pah! what a smell, too."
> "Ah, my way now," cried the old man, peering before him, "where lies my way to my state-room?"

> "I have indifferent eyes, and will show you;
> but, first, for the good of all lungs, let me
> extinguish this lamp."
> The next moment, the waning light
> expired...(217)

Providence, even within the first phase of Melville's inquiry, has been viewed consistently with skepticism, particularly with respect to its ultimate ends. In "Benito Cereno", for example, Capt. Delano's attachment to a rosy notion of Providence is implied to bear a strong resemblance to the faulty reasoning at work within orderly, institutionalized religion and the false certainty attendant upon such dispositions. As a result Delano fails to deal with the threat of the here and now. Melville's distant implication is that God orchestrated the likelihood of such misunderstandings.

In The Confidence-Man, however, Providence is seen to possess specific intentions toward humanity, intentions so destructive and far-reaching that responsibility for their enforcement is a least partially delegated to divine emissaries. It is this shift in Melville's emphasis which informs the Cosmopolitan's final betrayal of the old man at the novel's end.

Still unwilling to wander too far from the inviolable sanctuary of God's rhetoric, the Cosmopolitan invokes the democratic fair-mindedness of Providence while consigning the old man's trust to a realm of threat. Once again the con-man's statements are double-edged, simultaneously

manipulating his listener while providing hidden clues to his own affiliations. An admission of trust in the beneficience of Providence not only weakens an already epistemologically weakened target, but it also serves as a reminder that Frank "Goodman", being among God's few peculiarly chosen ones, is the only character here whose trust in Providence is entirely justified. Providence, after all, would hardly betray its most industrious acolyte. Thus in extinguishing the old man's light God's agent has not only plunged him into epistemological darkness but has also generated a peril far worse than mere wrongheadedness. The hand of Providence, with considerable deliberation, will trigger pain seemingly for the entertainment of a psychopathic deity.

Melville's epistemology, despite its reappearance in Billy Budd, could be said effectively to have ended here, the old man's darkness emblematically signalling the death of surprise, the irreversible defeat of all human inquiry by a God whose war game was never meant to be won by the merely mortal. Safety has finally been expunged.

As this second and most significant phase of Melville's epistemological development ends, it is evident that there has been a continued reliance on the structural pattern which served to outline Melville's position in earlier works. The Confidence-Man, however, deploys these devices

to the point of magnifying the limits of scrutiny. The result is a progression toward the unseen sources of doubt.

Among the structural components subjected to the greatest degree of extension are those of the indefinable character and the character unable to carry out acceptable acts of definition. Both are now so ubiquitous that they are effectively conflated.

Aligned with these shifts are similar progressions related to the sub-themes of accident and preference. With Humean impressions adhering to the whiteness of the Fidèle, all events are reduced to the level of the unexpected or the accidental. Similarly, the threat attached to the unseen nature of preferences has expanded to taint virtually all which could be designated by the term "conscious agency".

Finally The Confidence-Man extensively examines the nature of language and Melville's evolving concept of God. The failure to determine on the basis of observation with any degree of certainty whether something can be said to exist in a comprehensible fashion triggers Melville's demonstration of the impossibility of linguistically freezing or formulating that which resists control. The result here is a portrayal of language not unlike that provided by Derridean deconstruction.

Uniting and darkening these intensified explorations is the tireless tracking of a God whose nature and causal links to this disastrous state of affairs are now posited as

dangerous. Melville's epistemology, in burrowing too deep or moving too fast, can no longer be rescinded. The final phase is damage control.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MIND AT TWILIGHT

BILLY BUDD

The third and final phase of Melville's epistemology is represented by **Billy Budd**. Some readers in the past have taken this admittedly difficult text to be an exercise in conversion or Christian repentance. Melville (or at least his textual avatar), it seems, finally saw the light and decided to toe the party line by blissfully discovering God. This strikes me as a bizarre reading of the story's tone, one that also manages to ignore the broader consistency of Melville's work. No doubt the textual Melville of the works discussed here believed in God but, as has been seen thus far, it appears to have been the kind of God with whom no self-respecting resident of the Melvillean landscape would care to be seen in public.

The reading of the story invoked by this thesis is such that **Billy Budd** can be viewed as the final, resigned assimilation of **The Confidence-Man's** worst suspicions about the nature of safety and knowledge in the world. **Billy Budd** is a work of measured, narrative equivocation triggering a network of internecine interpretations effectively strangling inquiry much as the noose strangles Billy. The uncertainty which led to deception in **The Confidence-Man** is now portrayed as a contaminant whose operations cannot be stopped, a de facto killer. This "inside narrative" (429) is in fact so "inside" that the

events it attempts to depict are virtually "outside" of secure scrutiny. The result is a shrewd mapping out of the terrain of paralysis without quite the sort of fervid displays of linguistic gamesmanship encountered in earlier phases. Once again the structural pattern informing the theme of epistemological inquiry throughout Melville's work is not only present in Billy Budd but it is extended to that terminal point which represents the inevitable consequence of Humean skepticism. Epistemology ends as a post-mortem on the annihilation of faith.

Hinging on the nature of character for its significance, the story and its foundations shift repeatedly as the narrator alters the focus on the ramifications of ambiguity and their role in defining the appearance or reality of whatever constitutes human character. The story's three central figures, for example, appear from the outset to have inherited flawed natures over which they have little if any control. Although it will be my position that this perspective is held throughout Billy Budd, the specific nature of these "given" natures is rendered ever more problematic. An attempt will therefore be made in this chapter to examine the paradox of a determined indeterminacy. In this regard the main characters will first be viewed on the basis of their surface appearances and what these initially indicate about identity and safety.

In the light (or darkness) of the events surrounding Claggart's death these same figures will be studied once again in order to see how surfaces, always threatening for Melville, betray other equally problematic possibilities as to the fluidity of the self. Finally the subtle but ongoing presence of God within the background of these occlusions will also be scrutinized as a means of speculating that here, as elsewhere, "the Creator alone is responsible"(460) for the catastrophe of epistemology.

As the novel progresses Billy emerges not only as a conflation of the non-defining and indefinable characters but also as the symbolic embodiment of the current status of Melville's epistemology. Consequently my discussion of him will focus not only on the problem of how to situate his individual nature within a Humean sphere but also on the means by which the symbolic resonances of his fatal end seem to have been made to converge quite neatly with those of Melville's entire, collapsing inquiry.

Billy's dual relation (as character and symbol) to the convolutions of Melville's epistemology is suggested even in the mundane circumstances clouding the issue of his birth. Very near the outset the narrator states offhandedly that "for Billy... his entire family was practically invested in himself"(435). Alluding to his status as an orphan this statement initially appears innocuous. However, when one bears in mind that an orphan is unable to establish any

verifiable, family relation to other living persons its application to Melville's Humean predicament emerges more clearly. For Hume no one can establish verifiable relations with others precisely because no one can determine with certainty that any person actually exists. Thus Billy's birth not only reveals an opacity within Billy as an individual but it also mirrors the posture of Melville's orphaned inquiry and this is clarified when Billy is questioned on the subject of his origins.

> Asked by the officer, a small, brisk little gentleman as it chanced, among other questions, his place of birth, he replied, "Please, sir, I don't know."
> "Don't know where you were born? Who was your father?"
> "God knows, sir." Struck by the straightforward simplicity of these replies, the officer next asked, "Do you know anything about your beginning?" "No, sir."(437)

Given his absence of living relations, Billy's ignorance as to the identity of his father, the place of his birth or any of the peripheral circumstances surrounding this event would tend to render his sudden appearance in the world indistinguishable from that of a Humean impression. Impressions, bearing no observable relations amongst each other, are solitary vulcanisms whose ontological status is clouded. Billy, it turns out, is also a vulcanism or eruption on a landscape in which order has been erased by the disappearance of relations. As Billy's status subtly coincides with that of an impression it is possible to recognize the convergence of the character and the inquiry.

On the one hand Billy as an orphan becomes the means by which Melville illustrates the ongoing relevance of the sub-theme of accident (Billy's birth as inexplicable, random occurrence) as well as the means for suggesting that Billy is one more evocation of the indefinable character, a force whose dynamics (insofar as one can use such a term) will ultimately defy all attempts at analysis. However, beyond this it is also clear that in his unique distillation of the Humean predicament Billy symbolizes the obstruction effectively halting the strictly Humean aspect of Melville's inquiry, the impression which can neither be explained nor circumvented.

It was noted earlier that each of the narrative's main characters, despite a connection to a problematic Humean state of affairs, is initially presented as possessing a seemingly stable nature whose constitution has been predetermined. In Billy's case this strategy is enhanced by his association with Adam and the Fall.

> By his original constitution aided by the co-operating influences of his lot, Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company.
>
> And here be it submitted that apparently going to corroborate the doctrine of Man's Fall, a doctrine now popularly ignored, it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulturate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these,

> as if indeed transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man.(438)

This passage, deceptively complex, could be said principally to convey the idea that Billy lacks certain attributes vital to a comprehension of the everyday world but the manner in which the narrator orchestrates this presentation is anything but straightforward. Billy, it is said, possesses qualities oddly "out of keeping" with what the narrator calls "Cain's city" or "citified man". Clearly "citified" living is the concrete, temporal world, not only that of Cain but also that of Hume, the world of impressions for the understanding of which no attributes are adequate. In this regard Billy is once again a mirror of the status quo of Melville's epistemology.

Beyond this, however, is the question of those particular qualities which Billy actually does possess, qualities shrewdly characterized as "pristine and unadulturate" deriving from his "original constitution " and his "lot" or cirumstances. When one is further told that he is an "upright barbarian" seemingly untouched by "custom or convention" the narrator's rhetoric serves to portray Billy as a figure entirely formed by impenetrable forces not responsive to human intervention. It is this state of affairs which renders Billy's perspective "out of keeping" with his surroundings. In this sense Billy emerges as another evocation of the character unable to carry out an act of definition and at this early stage such a predicament

is implied to be tantamount to epistemological helplessness. Thus at the story's beginning Billy's disposition, seemingly cemented by Nature, appears to be stable to the point of rigidity as well as harmless.

Upon reflection other matters of a more disquieting nature emerge from this account of Billy. Those factors, for example, which determine the degree to which his constitution is "out of keeping" render Billy, in terms of Melville's own invocation of the myth of the Fall, a pre-fallen figure in a world which fell eons earlier. Following from this is the question of how such a disastrous situation could ever actually come to pass. The response, it would seem, lies in the narrator's suggestion that the predicament of Billy's disposition just might "corroborate the doctrine of man's Fall". The nature of this corroboration is in the form of an implied bifurcated universe. Just as Billy's "pristine and unadulturate" qualities are seen to stem from a zone of forces impervious to the probes of mere mortals, it is also clear that this bifurcation is viewed as the manifestation of the bifurcation which preceded it in the form of the Fall. In this sense whatever could be called Nature (admittedly a problematic term given Melville's epistemology) in **Billy Budd** is actually that instrument of God triggered as the means of enacting the Fall. Thus in the broad sense the cause of Billy's various fatal occlusions is the fracture designed by God, the same

fracture suggested by Melville's use of the spy motif and its implied relation to Adam in The Confidence-Man. It is through this suggested line of thought that Melville's concept of God hovers in the story's background while frequently appearing absent.

Consistent with the strategy of initially depicting Billy as a seemingly non-threatening figure possessed of a stable constitution is the narrator's effort to situate Billy with respect to satire.

> ...Billy, though happily endowed with the gaiety of high health, youth, and a free heart, was yet by no means of a satirical turn. The will to it and the sinister dexterity were alike wanting. To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature.(435)

The dexterity facilitating satire is one which entails not only a command of a sophisticated vocabulary but also a grasp of its underlying network of concepts as well as the referents associated with these various operations. The fact that Billy is deficient in these matters is highly significant not only for his own individual character but also for the larger import of Melville's overall epistemology.

Unable to track the course of double meanings and insinuations Billy's mindset suggests that language is characterized by hidden shifts of signification that are accompanied throughout by broader epistemological indeterminacies. Having no "will" by virtue of "his nature"

to engage himself with this realm, Billy is poetically condemned to a truncation of mind befitting those other God-given characteristics which somehow manage to insure that he is "out of keeping"(438) with his lethal surroundings. Thus in this respect Billy's blindness to satire enhances the view of his character as one which is consistent, non-threatening and predetermined.

Paralleling this incipient elaboration of Billy's character is the simultaneous evocation of Melville's epistemological predicament. In The Confidence-Man language, pushed to the extremes of targeting every subtlety, failed to assist in achieving the safety associated with certainty. Linguistic shifts became mired in language's self-referential trajectory. In Billy Budd's terms the fate of satire and the epistemological state underlying it represent the defeat of inquiry and this is acknowledged in Billy's convergence with Melville's progression. The lapse of satire which once again announces the presence of a non-defining character also mirrors an epistemology which, in its Humean and linguistic aspects, is equally non-defining, a state of affairs which will emerge with greater clarity when Billy's stutter and the Dansker's wordless suspicions are examined in a similar light.

If Billy's incapacity for satire can be viewed as a barometer of the overall occlusion and hopelessness of his position in the world, then his stutter is the predictable

consequence of the effort to engage such a disposition with a realm of opacity defying even momentary incursions. Here again, however, the crippling stance of one character matches that of his creator's inquiry.

> ...yet under sudden provocation of strong heartfeeling his voice, other wise singularly musical, as if expres sive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse. In this particular Billy was a striking instance that the arch-interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth. In every case, one way or another he is sure to slip in his little card, as much as to remind us I too have a hand here.(438-439)

Stuttering, much like the disappearance of satire, is the failure to articulate. Given the significance of articulation not only in **Billy Budd** but throughout Melville's work, Billy's stutter can be viewed as symptomatic of the much greater failure to define or even to know. This suggests not only the disharmony between language and whatever it is meant to be elucidating but in addition there is a sense here of a much broader epistemological disaster. Billy's "hesitancy" is a collision with the inexplicable, a position illustrating the degree to which a Humean state of affairs indeed cannot be known since impressions remain mysterious in themselves and disconnected from all other impressions. The only acceptable response is one of "hesitancy" or silence. Thus this particular enhancement of Billy the non-defining

character is also a microcosmic representation of Melville's terminating probe.

The narrator's invocation of an "organic hesitancy", however, carries other ramifications. The term "organic" here, insofar as it is related to the narrator's further use of the terms "musical" and "harmony", alludes to the presence of order. Within Billy, however, this order has been disrupted. In this context the equivocal "organic" may refer to the origin of Billy's hesitancy. On such a scale the fracture or disorder pervading the organic would seem to be Humean since Billy's particular hesitancy is an instance of harmony being overrun by anarchy. Thus it is hardly surprising that in the Bellipotent's epistemological climate "forewarning intimations of subtler danger from one's kind come tardily if at all" (476). For both Billy and Melville the disorder or disharmony of impressions precludes (consistent with Hume) the possibility of prediction.

Just as Billy's overall disposition was aligned earlier with Adam and the Fall, his stutter is moved into the shadow of "the envious marplot of Eden". At first glance one might readily infer that this figure could only be Satan. Considering Melville's penchant for seeking out ultimate causes, however, Satan is at the very worst an accessory to some other agent's designs.

> ...Billy's "defect" (which will eventually be responsible for his "sin" and consequently responsible for his punishment by death) [is] an "original" blemish or birthmark from

> Nature, or (allegorically considered) a gift from God, his Maker. In this anti-Christian context, God might be viewed as the responsible source of this defect, this depravity, this sin, this death; God might be viewed as `the arch-interferer, the envious marplot of Eden'. (Thompson 367)

Billy's defect, as Lawrance Thompson's line of thought suggests, is the result of a long chain of unseen contingencies originating in Eden. Cognitive limits and the haze of the external world, much like Billy's stutter, were triggered by the fragmented potential of the act of Creation. Thus Billy's disharmony, mirroring that of Nature, is God's doing. As noted earlier with respect to this story and The Confidence-Man, the Fall and the pre-determined conditions leading up to it were the beginning of the death of knowledge, the first "hesitancy" so to speak by divine ordination.

With this in mind one can recognize that Billy is indeed initially portrayed as a non-defining character seemingly unlikely to be threatening. Accompanying this structural component of Melville's epistemology, however, is the continued fundamental reliance on the concept of a particularly menacing God, one whose presence in the text is largely that of suggestion. It is this pervasive shadow which indicates that appearances are not likely to remain anaesthetized for long. Billy, despite his surface difference from Claggart, is already moving into the latter's sphere. If Claggart is possessed of "a depravity

according to nature"(458) Billy is clearly possessed of a deprivation according to nature, a view supported by Lawrance Thompson(378). Both men (in the vernacular) are "loose cannons". The border between depravity and deprivation, between the character who cannot be defined and the one who cannot define is effectively invisible.

Just as Billy, though clouded in constitution, emerges from the story's early stages as a stable avatar of the non-defining character, prior to Claggart's death Capt. Vere also appears to inhabit the same terrain. In addition he, like Billy, implicitly possesses the potential to transgress at any moment the unseen boundary of what Melville views to be the far more threatening realm of the character who remains indefinable. It is the shifts in this initially shared disposition which eventually trigger the violent consequences of the failure to know.

> He [Capt. Vere] had seen much service, been in various engagements, always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline; thoroughly versed in the science of his profession, and intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so.(444)

Much as Billy's "pristine and unadulturate"(438) qualities reside beyond human control, Capt. Vere's nature, though more equivocally articulated, appears equally unadulturate in its cerebral trajectory, suggesting that here as well disposition does not exhibit the latitude of choice. Unlike Billy, however, Capt. Vere is a "mindful"

man of reason, one appearing to be substantially less occluded than his foretopman until it is noted that this particular mindset is being enacted in a world pervaded by indeterminacy. In this light the captain's attachment to reason is ominous, an inference strongly supported by problems encountered in the passage cited above.

The objects of Capt. Vere's mindfulness are welfare and infractions. At first glance this seems hardly surprising since one would expect almost any captain to demonstrate an interest in the needs of his crew while also maintaining order. Capt. Vere, however, is not quite doing this. On the one hand the narrator's juxtaposition of welfare and infractions suggests that Capt. Vere is seeking to establish what he believes to be an achievable balance or state of order. Regrettably this balance is undermined when one recognizes that Vere never tolerates any infractions whatsoever. Is it possible to be genuinely mindful of his crew's welfare when his apparent rigidity will not permit even the occasional bending of regulations? Presumably mercy would have some role to play in defining the needs of others. Insofar as Capt. Vere fails to achieve the balance he seeks even at this early stage, his predicament serves not only to situate him as a character unable to define the actual state of affairs but also to illustrate Melville's ongoing preoccupation with the inefficacy of reasoning. The

impossibility of balance merely reaffirms the prevalence of a fragmentation not susceptible to control or clarification.

This approach to Capt. Vere is encouraged by the remaining lines of the same passage. The captain, it is noted, has mastered "the science of his profession". With little reason to assume that such undeviating rationality would be applied merely to the subject of naval affairs, the reader is free to speculate that for Capt. Vere the tendency to implement the approach of "science" would cause the broad spectrum of human acts to be predictably abbreviated and flattened as a means of generating what passes for a highly conspicuous clarity of judgment. This in fact is precisely what occurs at Billy's court martial when Capt. Vere, in his capacity as a lawyer, reduces the nature of Billy's act to the point of seemingly isolating a physical blow within a legalistic test tube. As both captain and lawyer Vere relentlessly imposes the distorting grid of reason, a matter of which the reader is forewarned when the narrator, in the same passage above, characterizes the captain as "intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so". Once again Vere's goal can be viewed as the desire to be judicious, but this is subtly subverted by the narrator's invocation of a persistence amounting to recklessness. Such a stance flies in the face of any practical definition of the judicious. This is confirmed at the court martial, suggesting a Melvillean distrust of "judicious" thought.

Given Vere's penchant for all things suggesting order it is not surprising that in Melville's scheme of things he is characterized as betraying "a certain dreaminess of mood"(445), one leading him to "absently gaze off at the blank sea"(445). Dreaminess and blankness, in the context of the operations of such a consciousness, are not without their ironic possibilities.

If Capt. Vere's dominant characteristic is that of a rigid adherence to the dictates of reason, then the positioning of such a perspective in close proximity to dreaming can surely be viewed as detrimental to reason's credibility. Melville's epistemology, with the exception of its preoccupation with a malicious deity, maintains in the strict sense that certainty is not achievable in the temporal world. Without certainty there is also no safe order and thus no longer any compelling purpose for perpetuating one's loyalty to undeviating procedures. Order and reason are consequently jettisoned as dream-like hazards.

Hume, as noted previously in this thesis, adopted much the same attitude toward order and the reliability of reason. All beliefs relating to the presence of actual objects and human agents in the world, their persistence through time and the reliability of alleged cause-effect relations are deemed unverifiable through reason. Reason, in seeking to transcend impressions, achieves the

precariousness of dream. The degree to which such precariousness can be threatening will be examined more closely when Capt. Vere implements a particularly distilled variety of reason at Billy's court martial.

Supporting this Melvillean and Humean subversion of Capt. Vere's mindset is the narrator's invocation of the "blank sea". Oddly reminiscent of the whale's "colorless, all-color" in **Moby-Dick**, the blankness would seem to be unnoticed by Capt. Vere whose "dreaminess", in effect, has been superimposed upon an indeterminate terrain. Once again the Melvillean and Humean positions converge. The symbolic significance of the "blank sea" is informed by the clouded operations of sense impressions. Having no possibility of supplying surefire evidence that the external world favors one particular structure rather than any other, impressions foster a corrosive blankness. Capt. Vere's dreamy divergence from this actual state of affairs is a mark of his diminishing trustworthiness.

Already at this early stage of **Billy Budd**, particularly with respect to the narrator's highly strategic approach to Capt. Vere's disposition, it is possible to detect the presence of a pervasive narrative equivocation which mirrors Melville's progressive linguistic predicament. In **The Confidence-Man** dialogue and tropes highlighted the failure of signification. Here, however, instability is seemingly inscribed within any attempt to articulate, suggesting an

extension or seeping inward of language's paralysis. As C.N. Manlove has noted, "Qualifiers seem not to aid but to obscure definition"(289). Statements, at first glance simple or straightforward, trigger conflicting interpretative forces. This posture is consistent with the full assimilation of the implications to be derived from **The Confidence-Man**'s illumination of a deconstructive landscape slowly shifting out of control. In **Billy Budd** the very act of utterance is self-defeating (an epistemological stutter) and it is this which the internecine views of Claggart's death serve to convey.

Capt. Vere's attachment to books, pursued in the shadow of language's virtual demise, does little to rehabilitate an image taking on the proportions of a considerable threat.

> He had a marked leaning toward every thing intellectual. He loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best...With nothing of that literary taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle, his bias was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines:... history, biography, and unconventional writers...who...philosophize upon realities. In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse, so that as touching most fundamental to pics, there had got to be established in him some positive convictions which he forefelt would abide in him essentially unmodified...(446)

Just as Billy's "pristine and unadulturate" (438) qualities are seen to stem from Nature, Capt. Vere is

characterized by a "marked leaning" whose sheer deep-rootedness suggests a similar origin. Here, however, the leaning is toward matters of the mind and Capt. Vere emerges as a creature who consistently longs for the order and predictability implied to be associated with the works in his library. Historical and biographical texts (recent literary theory notwithstanding) traditionally seek not only to mirror events but also to depict them in a fashion suggesting that such events have a beginning, a middle and an end. Within the context of Melville's overall epistemology such a stance is so overloaded with dangerous assumptions that it is scarcely worthy of serious attention. However, Capt. Vere wanders even further. Having little interest in style or the "vehicle" of literary conveyance he necessarily dismisses nuance and the possibility of shifting meaning. This is significant since it suggests that Capt. Vere somehow manages the neat trick of reading a work while strangely concluding that its alleged underlying truth has been grasped by circumventing mediation. At Billy's trial this peculiar attitude to language proves fatal. At this point, however, it merely serves to illustrate the captain's relation to the presumed accessibility of some greater realm of order.

The degree to which Capt. Vere is mired in epistemological difficulties is further evident in the narrator's ironic characterization of him as a "serious mind

of superior order", one who not only occupies a position of "authority" but is also interested predominantly in "realities" or truths. All of these terms suggest stable hierarchies not dependent for their ontological status upon the observations of the individual, conscious agent. When it is additionally noted that this mindset is the means by which Capt. Vere achieves "confirmation of his own more reasoned thoughts" questions arise not only about the validity of Vere's insights, a validity seriously handicapped by Melville's steady adherence to a more Humean position, but also about the trustworthiness of his motives. Does he adhere to convictions which remain "essentially unmodified" because he believes they ultimately gain access to the true state of affairs or is it simply because for such a man an unknowable universe is made bearable by order rigorously maintained? The evidence here would seem to indicate that the latter is more likely the case. As Lawrance Thompson has suggested "Vere prides himself on using his `intelligent part' for sandbag purposes"(372). He likes stasis, "settled convictions"(446) capable of transformation into "lasting institutions"(447). In this sense Merlin Bowen is correct in his view that with respect to Capt. Vere "Control is perhaps his most marked characteristic"(221). He imposes structure despite its tendency to distort because chaos and unpredictability are so dangerous they must be anaesthetized at virtually any

cost. Much like the lawyer in "Bartleby" Capt. Vere will persist in playing it safe even when such a thing is impossible.

Even prior to Claggart's death Capt. Vere represents the Humean threat of reason. As a man of thought he seeks to make sense of things even if they do not actually permit it. Just as Hume's view of reason is that of a realm which fails to verify such matters as the existence of the external world and other people, Capt. Vere's apparent inability to distinguish his own private wishes from whatever constitutes the actual state of affairs is the means by which Melville has indicated reason's nopelessness in defining the world and then freezing change or indeterminacy. In this manner Capt. Vere, at least initially, has been moved into the category of the character unable to carry out sufficient acts of definition, placing him for the moment along side Billy.

While Billy and Capt. Vere are at least provisionally categorized as non-defining characters, Claggart emerges from the outset as the extreme evocation of the indefinable character, the epistemological threat which has now moved in so closely that its proximity leads to multiple deaths. Melville's manner of conveying this, however, is laced with considerable ambiguity the first trace of which is detectable when the narrator states of Claggart's origins that "Nothing was known of his former life"(448). Oddly

mirroring Billy (perhaps a roundabout means of suggesting Billy's own potential status as a threat) Claggart also is situated epistemologically as something of an orphan, a sudden and inexplicable vulcanism within a Humean haze. Just as impressions adopt the appearance of accident, Claggart is seemingly non-existent at one moment and present aboard the Bellipotent the next. Beneath the resonances of his clouded ancestry, however, are the epistemological coils concealing the more dangerous terrain of disposition and intent.

If the world, viewed in the light of the non-defining character, frequently appears to be pervaded by what is known in this thesis as the sub-theme of accident, the same world, when considering the indefinable character, is also contaminated by the less visible threat of the sub-theme of preference.

> For what can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal, however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself?(456)

Claggart's psychopathic disposition alluded to above is the last in a chain of increasingly menacing evocations of the ramifications of preference. In the first phase Bartleby's preferences, though symptomatic of epistemological indeterminacy, could be viewed at least from the confines of the narrative as instances of somewhat

passive resistance. In the second phase the con-man's cagey constitution sought to manipulate and deceive. Claggart, however, has moved up (or down) in the world to the level of "antipathy". What used to be passive resistance is now active hatred with a bent toward destroying what it does not like. In this sense Melville's view of epistemological indeterminacy has escalated from the frustrating to the lethal.

Preference in the case of Claggart remains within the orbit not only of Hume's position but also within that of Melville's parallel concern for the epistemological failures of language. Thus it comes as no surprise that Claggart's antipathy is characterized as "spontaneous", a triggering of something seemingly not linked to any observable cause or provocation. What does suggest a change, however, is the narrator's invocation of the qualifier "mysterious".

Some would claim that Melville's epistemology of skepticism is, in large part, belief in the pervasiveness of mystery. While this is true Billy Budd remains the only major work to posit mystery overtly while curtailing what had previously been a penchant for relentless probing. The significance of this strategy should not be minimized.

The "mysterious" aspect of Claggart's antipathy is powerfully resonant. On the one hand the invocation of a mystery here represents the overt failure of scrutiny and reason. No longer able to ground the self epistemologically

in a world of disconnected and "spontaneous" impressions Melville's narrator truncates inquiry. Selves and objects as they actually are have become hopelessly indeterminate or "mysterious" much as they are for Hume whose reliance on impressions renders anything beyond surface appearance a mystery.

On the other hand the "mysterious" is an indicator of the narrowing and unstable boundaries of language within Melville's epistemology at this stage. In **The Confidence-Man** the figure of God's agent, forever calculating and maneuvering, was surely as mysterious as any of the passengers on the Bellipotent. This quality, however, was never posited as such, and implicit within this stance was a narrative assumption that the ambiguities of the universe were worthy of an exhaustive, linguistic survey. The consequence of this seemingly unrelenting exercise was an incipient awareness that language fails to connect with that which it seeks to define. In the light of this the designation of Claggart's antipathy as "mysterious" suggests a narrative recognition that signifieds are effectively beyond the reach of any signifiers. Melville's epistemology has noticeably begun to lose momentum suggesting that **Billy Budd** announces the demise of the mind, a view shared by William Wasserstrom in his contention that "Melville had no faith in the power of intelligence, no matter how resolute, over mystery, no matter how matter of fact"(138).

Claggart's incapacity to be defined precisely is further evident when the narrator, seemingly suspending him in a void, states " To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross `the deadly space between'. And this is best done by indirection"(456). Aside from illustrating the difficulty of ever determining how one could safely go about defining the term "normal" in a fragmented world, the passage above also alludes to the nature of those epistemological shadows which permanently conceal the workings of Claggart's disposition.

Perhaps the most intriguing barrier to one's view of Claggart is suggested by the narrator's invocation of the notion of space. Figuratively isolated much like a solitary, distant flicker in a hazy landscape, Claggart has achieved the puzzling aspect of a Humean impression. Situated across some abyss or "deadly space" not susceptible to transgression, he has been severed from other human agents much as an impression for Hume is severed from any trustworthy and observable connections to others of its kind. Thus Claggart has been marooned in epistemological and ontological indeterminacy.

This perspective would seem to be supported by the linguistic implications of the narrator's apparent belief that any attempt to comprehend Claggart must be carried out through "indirection". As was noted earlier with respect to Claggart's "mysterious" antipathy, language in <u>The</u>

Confidence-Man was at least provisionally viewed as an instrument possibly leading to the attainment of clarification. In **Billy Budd**, however, the relegation of Claggart to the mysterious and definition to the opacity of "indirection" represent a sharp decline in what is believed to be the efficacy of verbal formulation. The bind consequently encountered by Melville's narrator is, as Barbara Johnson indicates, self-defeating.

> For how reliable can a description be if it does not hit its object? What do we come to know of John Claggart if what we learn is that his portrait is askew?... If to cross a space by indirection - that is, by rhetorical displacement - is to escape deadliness, that crossing can succeed only on the condition of radically losing its way.(92)

Melville's epistemology, no longer subscribing to the possibility that opacity can be cleansed long enough to permit a "direct" linguistic approach, is restricted to the defeat which necessarily accompanies "indirection", a defeat defined by the need to adopt the premise that signification conveys little more than vague suspicion. The net result of such a stance is that **Billy Budd**'s narrative, as will be seen in its tendency to provide sharply conflicting views of virtually every major character and event, circles or hovers over the Bellipotent in a state of skeptical paralysis. In Johnson's terms "The place of explanation and definition is repeatedly filled, but its content is always lacking"(94). With Claggart and virtually everyone else receding beyond reach Melville is left to contemplate mere "space".

Just as the Humean aspects of Melville's epistemology have effectively vaporized the everyday world, language within **Billy Budd** has achieved a predictable deconstructive spin which supports the overall skepticism of Melville's position. Claggart is the first blatant representation of language's final powerlessness to do more than convey "its own empty, mechanical functioning"(Johnson 94). It is this which is "deadly" for the narrator because articulation is an attempt to freeze or outline a world that is threatening not only because it resists control but also because this resistance, even here in **Billy Budd**, is posited (to be seen at Billy's hanging) as the consequence of divine intent.

Claggart's status as the character utterly resistant to precise definition is further abetted by the similar ambiguity mirrored within his utterances. On the occasion of Billy's accidental spilling of soup Claggart's response is the clouded statement, "Handsomely done my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!"(454). The reader, much like the narrator, is faced with the realization that Claggart's words fail to convey with certainty how he views the nature of the accessibility of so-called external events and their alleged connection to conscious intentions. Are the acts of other agents, assuming one believes these agents to exist, self-evident in their intended meanings or do they mean whatever an observer wishes them to mean? The very presence of this problem in the text with respect to

Claggart suggests that language has followed the fatal path of Melville's broader indeterminacy. Claggart is the final signpost to oblivion.

His range of possible attitudes here amounts to a double bind, one having its origin in what is already the seriously compromised position of reasoning in Melville's overall epistemology. On the one hand Claggart's response to Billy may conceivably represent a belief that human acts clearly mirror the disposition or intent of their instigators, a view briefly discussed by Barbara Johnson (83-84). If this is Claggart's posture, however, it rests upon the assumption that the powers of reasoning are so far-reaching that this faculty can safely posit cause-effect relations which prevail between so-called private mental acts and external events. With Melville and Hume so rigorously opposed to this line of thought Claggart emerges on this count as hazardously off the mark.

The only other alternative view of Claggart's remark leaves him in even more dangerous territory. If one doubts his ostensible position that actions reveal the character of their doers it would seem likely that he has revised or expediently interpreted an admittedly vague occurrence in order to suit the needs of what the narrator has already termed equivocally his "mysterious" antipathy. In effect Claggart has placed reason at the service of impenetrable forces in order to substantiate what he wishes or needs to

believe. This, it turns out, is not unlike Hume's view of what transpires whenever anyone must render a judgment on the subject of what is most likely or probable.

> When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. Objects have no discoverable connexion together;... (Hume 103)

Wishes aside the conscious agent in the Humean world evaluates arguments on the basis of a feeling or an impact which itself cannot be adequately examined. This is tantamount to suggesting that disposition, however nebulous, determines belief and this factor carries considerable weight only because there are in fact "no discoverable connections" between events or objects. An observer is necessarily stranded without the possibility of outside confirmation. Applied to Claggart's approach to the spilled soup it is evident that no "discoverable" connection exists between the spill and whatever may account for Billy's motives. As a consequence Claggart remains faithful to his inexplicable antipathy and its capacity to generate belief. This is analogous to what Hume calls "feeling". Thus Claggart in his very psychopathy exemplifies what Hume and Melville regard as the central weakness of reasoning, its dependence in the end on nothing more than the individual subject's unfathomable constitution. In this regard Claggart, both indefinable and now non-defining, is the paradigmatic depiction of epistemology as nightmare.

The convergence of reason and psychopathy (or antipathy) within Claggart raises questions about the larger issue of Melville's prevailing view of reason. Is it merely a coincidence that a man whom the narrator designates as an "intellectual"(458) just happens to be flawed beyond comprehension by a mysterious antipathy occluding his powers of analysis? If one examines this in the light of Melville's previous work it becomes evident that there as well reason is flawed to the point of persistent failure, a condition exemplified by the reasoned operations of religion and the law.

If one weighs the distillations or distortions characterizing reason within Melville's metaphors of religion and the law against Claggart's peculiar perspective, it is difficult to conclude that there are any major differences here. The implication of such similarities is that reason, by virtue of its failures, is figuratively psychopathic much as Claggart is, "mysteriously" so until it is noted that within Melville's epistemology mystery is the handiwork of God.

Perhaps the final piece of evidence helping to situate the stance of Claggart's thinking is its unanticipated similarity to that of Capt. Vere. Embodying the metaphor of the law Capt. Vere carries out the same degree of isolated, flawed thinking at Billy's court martial, a matter to be discussed more extensively later in this chapter. However,

at this point what must be stressed is that Capt. Vere's formulations are perpetrated in the name of his and the law's penchant for order, suggesting that one man's mysterious antipathy is hardly dissimilar to another's equally mysterious and hazardous attachment to order. Claggart and Vere, insofar as they exercise what could be called reason, are figures of one uncontrollable landscape of the mind, a view explored by Eric Henderson (44-45) and Merlin Bowen when he says of Vere, "By both temperament and training, he is much closer to the petty officer he despises than to the young foretopman he admires"(218). Thus Claggart the psychopath, like all of Melville's indefinable characters, can be regarded as an emblem of reason's psychopathy, its disconnected and perhaps even uncaring perspective on an epistemological disaster which it has not yet even noticed.

Contributing most significantly to the portrayal of Claggart as a persistently indefinable character in the early stages of **Billy Budd** is the narrator's account of his depravity. This passage is so heavily loaded with allusions to various aspects of Melville's epistemology that it cannot be overlooked.

> Though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say:

> Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound. These men are madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous, but occasional, evoked by some special object; it is protectively secretive, which is as much as to say it is self-contained, so that when, moreover, most active it is to the average mind not distinguishable from sanity,...the method and outward proceeding are always perfectly rational.
>
> Now something such an one was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendend by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short "a depravity according to nature".(457)

The nature of Claggart's implementation of reason here is such that the operations of his particular psychopathic condition are indistinguishable from those of reason in general. The narrator states, for example, that Claggart utilizes the "ambidexter implement" of reason in order to achieve aims bordering on "atrocity". The fact that what appears to be trustworthy rationality is the origin of inexplicable malice merely suggests the presence once again of the sub-theme of preference, the sheer imperviousness of the conscious subject. Within Melville's epistemology, however, this predicament is virtually the status quo. What distinguishes Claggart from other inhabitants of Melville's world is that his intentions, no more ambiguous than those of anyone else, generate a greater degree of threat. As an individual this tends to move him into the shadow of a figure like the divine swindler in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, a

view endorsed by Richard Chase (262). Figuratively, however, the puzzling inconsistency between Claggart's "cool judgment sagacious and sound" and his "lunacy" is a mark of reason's persistent inefficacy throughout Melville's epistemological inquiry. Claggart and what the narrator calls "madmen" are exemplars of reason's essentially impotent constitution, a view which in spirit is not unlike that of Hume.

This latter view of reason is enhanced by the narrator's focus on the "self-contained" nature of Claggart's madness. Aside from the fact that it eludes scrutiny, his psychopathy is also characterized as "protectively secretive" as well as possessing "method" and an outward aspect appearing "always perfectly rational". Apart from its suggested links to the Humean problem of appearance and reality this account of madness is simultaneously a standard account of Melvillean reason, so "self-contained" and "secretive" that it can be used neither for dealing with the world nor for comprehending itself. To reason is to incur destruction.

Other connections to Melville's epistemology are evident in the passage above. Claggart's disposition, already made dangerous by the presence of preference and its relation to undisclosed intentions, is given an added twist when the narrator undermines any possible underlying consistency by positing that the lapses or deviations of the

master-at-arms are merely "occasional" in nature, suggesting that they are detached from a suitably verifiable cause. Accident, in such a haze, could conceivably erupt at any moment and this is distinctly Humean in its ramifications. Thus Claggart, a compression of accident and preference, is the embodiment of the two principal epistemological threats fracturing the Melvillean world.

Responsibility for this state of affairs is implied within the narrator's seemingly hollow definition of Claggart's overall condition. This particular psychopath, it seems, is possessed of "a depravity according to nature". Deriving neither from his "training" at the hands of others nor from his own mode of "living" this disposition was evidently inscribed within his nature from the first moment of conception. Claggart's "nature" thus owes its status to the broader Nature that produced it, the same Nature responsible for Billy's stutter. Given what has been seen already of the contaminating influence of God (the true "marplot of Eden") within this realm and the suggested role played later by this figure on the occasion of Billy's execution, it is possible to conclude that Claggart's "depravity" mirrors a depraved deity much as the con-man's mercilessness reflected divine malice in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>. After all, what sort of God would permit a Claggart to come into existence even momentarily? Thus, in the characterization of Claggart Melville has not only expanded

his concept of God implicitly but in addition the phrase "depravity according to nature", insofar as it remains imprecise, can be linked to the "mysterious" aspect of Claggart's so-called "antipathy" and as a consequence to the compromised status of language in Melville's late epistemology.

In this last phase the purview of language within Melville's epistemology is best viewed through the appearance of the Dansker, whose significance, not only as a symbol of Melville's inquiry but also as the closest thing to a defining character, has been heightened by the narrator's interest in "indirection"(456) and its epistemological implications:

> "Does he so?" grinned the grizzled one; then said, "Ay, Baby lad, a sweet voice has Jemmy Legs."
> "No, not always. But to me he has. I seldom pass him but there comes a pleasant word."
> "And that's because he's down upon you, Baby Budd."(454)

Just as Billy's stutter, transcending his own character, suggested a broader occlusion of articulation and the narrator's strategy of indirection was such that Claggart could not be approached more closely than through the invocations of mystery and natural depravity, the specific nature of the Dansker's understanding is consistent with language's final failure and is thus emblematic of Melville's position.

Like the narrator the Dansker, in his ambiguous and unverifiable assertion that the master-at-arms is "down upon" Billy, has brushed across Claggart's nature through an indirection of his own. Unable to articulate with precision he cannot freeze events or human agents. Instead he is left with an understanding indistinguishable from vague suspicion, an appropriate wordlessness which, though sensing a threat, can neither connect with its shape nor its exact proximity. Given his linguistic posture and the fact that his judgment later proves to be correct, the Dansker fatally undermines the credibility of Capt. Vere's belief in systems and the apparent efficacy of torturing language in the service of clarifying that which is judicially most significant. In this sense even the narrator whose equivocations are frequently viewed as so troublesome emerges as a figure whose predicament is nonetheless reliable since it reflects the actual Melvillean state of affairs.

Underlying the Dansker's shrinking belief in the safety of signification is Melville's terminal deconstructive stance. The Dansker's act of definition, opaque and truncated by severe "indirection", is the eclipse of epistemology, the recognition that signifiers are simultaneously so hollow and so uncontrollable in their trajectory that there may no longer be any justification for their use. In Harold Beaver's terms "Melville, in fact,

emerges more a post-structuralist than a mere modernist; and his ...indeterminacy principle (`Read it if you can') may finally be translated [to] the terms of...Derrida's Grammatology"(78). Thus like Billy the Dansker is a barometer of the outcome of Melville's inquiry.

It is only fitting that Billy's fatal blow to Claggart, so epistemologically resonant, should be the occasion of the dissolution of whatever precarious stability might have been thought to persist aboard the Bellipotent. The blow, unexpected and inexplicable, corrodes deeply into the fabric of events and identity. On the one hand it is the symbolic evocation of the isolated, seemingly uncaused, primitive, sense impression of Hume. This is exemplified in the failure to determine the precise underlying causes which led Billy to strike Claggart. Billy's own explanation relating the event to the frustrations of his stutter merely begs the question. What is it about the stutter which necessitates a violent blow? The event becomes even more clouded when Billy claims he "did not mean to kill"(482) Claggart. What was it that he did mean? Did he mean anything at all that was accessible? Thus the blow, like an impression, hovers in a peculiar region of indeterminacy escaping the possibility of being understood with certainty; beyond this its haziness of context suggests that Melville has once again invoked the sub-theme of accident in relation to the threat posed by the failure to know. That which cannot be

assimilated is effectively condemned to the status of an unforeseen blow.

Violent collapse does not cease here, however. As Barbara Johnson has suggested, "the fate of each of the characters is the direct reverse of what one is led to expect from his `nature' "(82). If the blow with all of its epistemological hooks could demolish the stability of an occurrence, human identities can be made to disappear as well. Seemingly moving in ceaseless fashion along some unseen ontological track, characters glide past each other unnoticed from one extreme to another. Billy, at first the non-defining victim of a disposition ill-equipped seemingly by divine intent to grapple with the threats of the world, has become his would be victimizer's predator. Claggart, the psychopath who seeks to victimize, has himself become an unexpected victim, one whose fate is perhaps worse than that which he hoped to implement for Billy. Finally Capt. Vere, in a charitable light perhaps subject to being viewed initially as a merely muddled and burdened caretaker of a disastrous world, will prosecute Billy into the grave with suspicious expediency.

Arising from all of this is the classic Humean question of what to do with an alleged sequence of impressions if even one impression cannot be understood sufficiently. If the impression represented by Billy's blow cannot safely be made to make sense, does this not undermine the reliability

of all of those prior impressions ostensibly defining who Billy actually is or even that he is? With Claggart and Capt. Vere also changing radically how could anyone claim to know who anyone was either before or after the blow? With such a spectrum of possibilities is it of any value to entertain a provisional notion of the self? For Harold Beaver "This sense of the self's inherent instability,... to become anything precisely because in itself it was nothing, came more and more to dominate Melville's thought"(78). As noted earlier in this thesis Melville's speculations in this respect are similar to Hume's view that the existence of a self is not subject to verification.

The violence of Billy's blow is also symbolic of the violence of epistemological fragmentation. Where nothing can be known shock can neither be anticipated nor checked. Certainty and predictability have been supplanted by a hypersensitivity to the likelihood of an "anything can happen" scenario, a condition whose ancestry can be traced to Hume's alarming assertion that "Any thing may produce any thing"(173). Thus in the death of Claggart the mystery or doubt not subject to containment is the mystery that kills.

With the blow to Claggart so richly textured with epistemological implications each character dissolves beyond even nominal definition when the blow brings into heightened relief a number of details at first appearing deceptively trivial. Billy is a case in point. It will be noted that

apart from functioning as an individual character he also represents in many respects the overall status of Melville's inquiry. This emblematic state, originally appearing favorable, takes on an entirely new light after Claggart's death. Factors such as his stutter as an indication of the broader failures of language, his status as an orphan, the occlusions of his non-defining character, the possible role of God as the "marplot of Eden" in Billy's limitations, and Billy's silence toward the chaplain subsequent to his trial mirror Melville's progress. Even his hanging can be viewed as the death of epistemology. From this angle Billy's state of affairs is apt to strike at least some readers as one worthy of their unqualified trust. After all, such a character could hardly be the enemy. But then how did he manage to kill someone?

Problems arise when one notes that the appearance of Billy as straightforwardly harmless is precisely that, an appearance or surface. The epistemology he represents is one which has been alert to the threat of surfaces from the very beginning since these are rarely if ever an indication of what is actually in place. Billy's blow reduces Billy to just such an elusive threat. Like a Humean sense impression the blow is seemingly unexpected and beyond scrutiny. In the resulting evaporation of any stable notion of a self whatever constitutes Billy has receded into the darkness already housing the menace of Claggart.

There remains a suggestion, however, that the circumstances surrounding Claggart's death, despite escaping precise formulation, are characterized by a dynamic capable of fostering repetition. Very near the story's beginning the narrator states that while still aboard the Rights of Man Billy experienced an altercation with a bullying figure referred to as "Red Whiskers"(433). Although their exchange of blows did not lead to death it seems quite clear that their confrontation was a paradigmatic forerunner of what would later occur aboard the Bellipotent. The implications of this repetition touch upon those aspects of Melville's epistemology deviating from a strictly Humean position.

Insofar as both incidents are structurally similar this repetition of inexplicable conflict suggests the presence of an unseen, threatening order within Nature. For William Wasserstrom this order as manifested within Billy takes on the form of the First Law of Thermodynamics (154) which maintains in part that energy blocked at one source will necessarily find some other outlet, but energy as such can neither be created nor destroyed by human agency. Billy's act of striking Claggart thus becomes the unavoidable consequence of his blockage of speech, the enforcement of a law which not only pre-dates Billy but also predetermines in an undisclosed manner just how he will function at any given moment. The repetition of confrontations tends to support this view.

Questions arise, however, as to why order in the Melvillean universe is simultaneously existent but utterly beyond safe comprehension. In **Billy Budd**, as in **The Confidence-Man**, "the Creator is entirely responsible"(460) for an agenda of undeviating, human suffering, a theme whose elaboration in this particular story will be examined more closely at the end of this chapter.

If Billy's constitution was susceptible to being viewed simultaneously in terms which were almost polar opposites, Claggart's nature is also hazy enough to trigger an equally extreme shift in appearance. This is accomplished not only as a result of Melville's position of epistemological indeterminacy rooted in skepticism but more specifically because of Claggart's stance in the context of Capt. Vere's initial appearance in the story. It is Vere's possibility for being regarded favorably prior to the court martial which enables Claggart to undergo a seeming transition.

With respect to Capt. Vere's posture early in the story as a non-defining character who is seemingly likeable and well-intentioned (although Melville's epistemology strictly precludes the possibility of knowing such things), Claggart is contextually positioned as "a sort of chief of police charged among other matters with the duty of preserving order"(448). This suggests not only that he is Capt. Vere's appointee but in addition it would appear that, like his captain, he is ostensibly an exponent of law and order.

With Vere still some time away from the disaster of Billy's trial Claggart's association with him would tend at first glance to grant the master-at-arms a certain air of respectability.

Order, however, aligns Claggart to Capt. Vere in an extremely problematic fashion. On the one hand this shared interest situates both men in the shadow of Melville's epistemological view that the possibility for defining the precise nature of whatever order prevails within the universe is simply not achievable. On this count Claggart and Vere emerge as capable of potentially lethal reasoning, a potential more than adequately fulfilled by the evidence of each man's subsequent actions.

More directly Claggart is moved into Capt. Vere's aura of stability when the narrator stresses his "intellectual look"(458), a characteristic suggesting the presence of a reliable depth of understanding. Like Vere it would appear that Claggart is a thinker. The captain's thoughts, however, are directed toward positing order on the basis of his involvement with particular kinds of reading material, the law and so-called "measured forms"(501). At some point these preoccupations just happen to find themselves relentlessly pursuing Billy's punishment. Claggart, it turns out, is doing much the same thing. His position as master-at-arms represents a nominal advocacy of law and order but his more hidden intellectual interests are devoted

almost exclusively to an apparent attempt to frame Billy for mutiny. This suggests, as Eric Henderson has noted, "a symbolic union between Claggart and Vere"(40). The nature of this union is one that illustrates the degree to which a reliance upon reason can be viewed as dangerous to the point of deadliness. In this sense reason as a disconnected and disoriented faculty is by necessity as psychopathic as Claggart. Claggart's symbolic union with Capt. Vere, however, appears to be mitigated early in the text because its invocation is prior to the reader's awareness of its subsequent consequences and this strategic narrative disclosure grants Claggart a lasting camouflage.

Even more beneficial to the master-at-arms is the irony which prevails among the circumstances surrounding his death. As the narrator indicates, "innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places"(480). Claggart, intent upon manufacturing an airtight case for mutiny against Billy, is killed seemingly without sufficient provocation. Billy, the hapless victim of a conspiracy he never noticed, has become a killer.

The epistemological ramifications of Claggart's withdrawal into obscurity here are intimately linked to Melville's narrative strategy. On the one hand the ambiguity seemingly inscribed within Billy's confrontation with Claggart illustrates the Humean view that the actual nature of an event can never be fully known. However, when

this shift in one's view of Claggart and Billy is situated in the context of the numerous similar shifts transpiring throughout the story, it becomes clear that such a strategy, one which C.N. Manlove characterized as Melville's "mode of advance and retire"(295), is symptomatic of the failure of language to connect with those events and entities which it seeks to define. Such a failure generates a paralysis indistinguishable from a provision for multiple possibility, precisely what one finds throughout **Billy Budd**. Characters and events can even be viewed plausibly as capable of self-contradiction.

Oddly enough such a position of linguistic deferral not unlike that associated with deconstruction was touched upon by Melville at least as early as **Pierre**.

> But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid and no body is there! - appallingly vacant...(323)

Melville's geological analogy of surfaces which never lead to anything but an "appallingly vacant" centre would seem to be at work linguistically and thus epistemologically within **Billy Budd**. Just as Billy, Claggart and Vere are conceivably vacant, the problem of surfaces is also evident in the narrator's difficulties regarding such things as Claggart's view of the spilled soup(468) and the hermetic

nature of the conscience of the master-at-arms the operations of which cannot be approached beyond the narrator's tentative discussion of how Claggart "probably" argued within himself (461). Thus unanswered questions, while epistemologically threatening, also indicate the presence of a deconstructive stance which simultaneously facilitates Claggart's possible rehabilitation, and this marks a progression beyond the attempts at control seen in The Confidence-Man.

Just as Billy and Claggart can be viewed in an equivocal light, Capt. Vere, at first glance the non-defining character who appears both long-suffering and rational with the desire to be prudent, is absorbed into the same epistemological haze. The manner in which this occurs links him disquietingly to the unseen mental processes of the master-at-arms. While Claggart seems to be sanitized by his similarities to the captain's demeanor prior to the court martial, it turns out that Vere is unexpectedly tainted at the moment of the court martial by his bizarre similarity to Claggart. This emerges as the lover of "measured forms"(501) proves unable to cope with the threat of formlessness.

The failures within Capt. Vere's judgment that are triggered by Billy's fatal blow are multiple. Having first effectively ignored his own suspicions of Claggart when the subject of mutiny was originally raised (472,474), he

pronounces a de facto verdict at the very moment that Claggart dies when he states aloud "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"(478). Then he violates both custom and the advice of his fellow officers by ordering an immediate court martial (478-479), one to be held so rapidly that it not only precludes the possibility of investigating the case in depth but also suggests to the Bellipotent's surgeon that Capt. Vere may be "unhinged"(479). It is hardly a coincidence that at this point the captain is being shifted figuratively into the epistemological terrain of the master-at-arms by virtue of the degree to which questions about his possibly "unhinged" state resemble those raised with respect to Claggart's "depravity". Just as Claggart's view of the spilled soup, for example, was so uniquely his own as well as so concealed and beyond influence that it was virtually psychopathic, Capt. Vere's rush to judgment and apparently oracular foreknowledge of the conviction to come suggest an equally hermetic, disconnected, idiosyncratic perspective. Each man acts on the basis of preference, a domain consistently portrayed by Melville as a supreme threat. Thus it would appear that both Claggart and Capt. Vere have their reasons for wanting Billy out of the way.

This darker aspect of Capt. Vere's character emerges more clearly when it is noted that he appoints a court whose members he knows to be unqualified (481). The question

arises as to why he is unwilling to wait until the Bellipotent has reached its destination. The narrator speculates that the mutiny aboard the Nore may have convinced Capt. Vere that the Bellipotent is similarly vulnerable unless Claggart's killing is handled promptly (481). This implies a fear of having order suspended even though this suspension is little more than a remote possibility. In effect Capt. Vere's fear is given precedence over Billy's actual welfare.

It is at this point that Vere's relations with Billy clearly resemble those of the Wall Street lawyer with Bartleby. In the latter case the lawyer cannot recognize the universal significance of Bartleby's impervious consciousness. He cannot see that Bartleby represents an aspect of his own clouded nature. Instead he invokes a lawyer-like reasoning to preserve himself from unsafe insights. He focusses so much upon propriety (another reasoned imposition of order) that his entire mode of emphasizing reason and the law leads to Bartleby's betrayal and eventual death.

Capt. Vere, it turns out, is not altogether different. Like Bartleby Billy represents the impenetrability of human nature and motives. Capt. Vere, much like his legal predecessor, is afraid of what he will discover. He fears that his rational edifice will give way to an epistemological wilderness, one no longer tolerant of

"measured forms" and the law. His unorthodox and highly conspicuous strategy of demanding a far too speedy trial amounts to a rejection of the opacity of the universe evoked by Billy and Claggart. What Capt. Vere wants most is to eradicate disorder and install in its place an undeviating adherence to law in the broadest sense of the term. To this end the sacrifice of one inarticulate foretopman assumes the air of a regrettable but bearable necessity.

The captain, like Bartleby's employer, carries out his epistemological rejection in his capacity as a lawyer. Once again reason is invoked to protect an attachment to an unwarranted notion of safety. Both men, in the end, deny not only the precarious status of whatever constitutes their "selves" but also the larger chaotic state of affairs and both invoke the superimpositions of the law in order to succeed. Each man opts for assumed knowledge in place of actual doubt and this thematic and structural similarity goes quite far toward undermining that particular reading of Billy Budd which seeks evidence of a Melvillean conversion.

As both prosecutor and judge Capt. Vere is the most lethal avatar of the fatal consequences of a lawyer-like attachment to reason. This is evidenced in his manner of mapping out the constrictions of martial law such that his fellow-officers are instructed to focus their attention solely upon "the blow's consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker's

deed"(484). As Barbara Johnson has indicated Capt. Vere's method of defining the context of the trial is one in which "The very choice of the `conditions' of judgment itself constitutes a judgment"(103). Ostensible clarity of mind has orchestrated a death sentence for Billy which transforms the very purpose for a trial into a nasty joke. It is in this way that Capt. Vere becomes what Lawrance Thompson characterizes as "an egregious literalist"(370), someone for whom the letter of the law is so sacred that the circumstances surrounding any event can be subjected to fatal attempts at distillation in the name of order. The result is what one of the other presiding officers refers to as a loss of "lateral light"(484). An event already hazy has been darkened beyond repair.

Most damning is the suggestion that Capt. Vere understands this but will do nothing about it. In response to the concern of the officer mentioned above Vere states "I see your drift. Ay, there is a mystery;... The prisoner's deed - with that alone we have to do"(484). The captain, while remaining the non-defining character, slips irretrievably into the territory of Claggart and the indefinable character whose actions present the threat of preference. In preferring to push ahead when he could easily delay the trial Capt. Vere, exponent of reason's efficacy at any cost, is effectively dislodged even from marginal view in the same manner as the psychopathic master-

at-arms. It is thus less than surprising that by pre-damning Billy he unwittingly accomplishes what appear to have been Claggart's original goals. Reason has proven to generate two very similar instances of psychopathy.

Progressively throughout Melville's work the metaphor of the law has been used as an instrument corroding the possibility for believable order. From **Moby-Dick** through "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, The Scrivener" the reasoning underlying the law attempts to freeze and define a realm utterly resistant to even marginal control. As Barbara Johnson states with respect to Capt. Vere, "the function of judgment is to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one"(105). However, in the Melvillean landscape virtually no situation other than defining the nature of God is a decidable one. Legalistic efforts to arrive at decisions thus result in ever more costly repercussions with **Billy Budd**'s evocation of this tendency leading to an execution. As in the case of Hume reason for Melville does not justify one's confidence since it cannot validate the nature of whatever happens to be the true state of affairs. Thus the law here represents reason's models in general and Billy's court martial is an exemplification of Melville's skeptical view of their perspective.

Aside from martial law's general constrictions Capt. Vere enforces others, perhaps the most devastating emerging from his assertion that "Budd's intent or non-intent is

nothing to the purpose"(487). With the question of intention effaced any possibility for establishing a context within which to evaluate Billy's actions has been jettisoned. This is significant since Capt. Vere, contrary to Melville, is a figure who posits the accessibility of order and thus could be said to adhere at least tacitly to the view that Billy's intentions are open to scrutiny and that his acts necessarily demand examination within this broader context. In defiance of the logic which inheres within his overall position Capt. Vere instead "uses a variety of strategies to direct the events toward the planned conclusion: the catastrophe of Billy Budd"(Henderson 50). With the role of circumstance minimized Billy has now become a candidate for the sort of hanging barely distinguishable from a lynching. To protect himself from what is merely the hypothetical possibility of a loss of control aboard the Bellipotent Capt. Vere provides what must be viewed within his own value scheme as "the pretense of justice and not justice itself"(Martin, Hero 115).

Vere's hypocrisy within this context is even more evident when he addresses the assembled members of the drumhead court and asks rhetorically, "But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King"(486). This distinction of law and Nature, quite possibly one of contrariness, is reminiscent of Plotinus Plinlimmon's bifurcation of time into

chronometricals and horologicals within **Pierre**, a view noted by Lawrance Thompson (397-398). Just as Plinlimmon's pamphlet suggests a profound incompatibility between the divine and human worlds, Capt. Vere's remarks implicitly advocate not only a loyalty to earthly authority (order as ordained by humans) but beyond this an adherence to such a mindset even when one strongly suspects that such order blatantly fails to grapple with what Vere terms "Nature", the larger, actual state of affairs in Melville's lexicon.

Because Capt. Vere is so explicit his adherence to this position is particularly incriminating. Knowing full well that the King's worldview, assisted by some of the captain's own peculiar needs, can accomplish little beyond distilling a complex network of events into one isolated blow, Vere arrogantly imposes such limits where the very distinction he emphasizes undermines their efficacy. His own words render him culpable within his own perspective since they suggest that in this instance the law will arrive at a verdict contrary to that of Nature. Thus Capt. Vere, in his undeviating preference for occluded reasoning, not only demonstrates the continued presence of Melville's Humean evaluation of reason but he is also once again aligned with Claggart as a psychopathic avatar, a mind beyond reach and threatening in its relentless operations.

Enforcement of Capt. Vere's highly questionable loyalty to the King's vision of order results in an expedient, legal

inversion analogous to the moral one mentioned by the narrator with respect to Claggart and Billy earlier in the story(480). This inversion assumes greater significance upon consideration of Capt. Vere's attitude to what the narrator calls the "blank" sea.

> For Captain Vere, he for the time stood - unconsciously with his back toward them, apparently in one of his absent fits - gazing out from a sashed porthole to windward upon the monotonous blank of the twilight sea.(485)

The sea's "monotonous blank", comprising as it does the Bellipotent's featureless environment, is symbolic here of the ultimately indeterminate nature of the world. Capt. Vere, disciple of "measured froms"(501), is not prone to recognize blankness as possible formlessness. Thus he is "absent" or not present to any inkling of the actual, problematic state of affairs. Instead he inhabits what the narrator characterizes as a "fit", superimposing onto the sea's blankness his own daydream or private thoughts.

This revision of blankness, it turns out, is identical to the legal distortion which Capt. Vere achieves at Billy's trial. Here he similarly superimposes his own brand of order or form onto events equally "blank" or impervious to study. The consequence is a similar "absence" of connection with whatever actually transpired. Reason, pursuing an unsafe, expedient path, has reached conclusions (a verdict) which do not justify or validate themselves. The resulting

margin of error is so vast that it now kills, providing a devastating illustration of Hume's contention that

> ...the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.(267-268)

The "twilight" of the sea has finally caught up with Melville's epistemology. With Billy soon to be executed inquiry is about to shut down permanently.

When one notes that Billy, Claggart and Capt. Vere are moving relentlessly in a haze of dangerously internecine, interpretative possibilities, questions arise as to why such an inconclusive state of affairs should ever be possible, let alone necessary. Evidence within the text suggests that for Melville the decks of the Bellipotent, like those of the Fidèle, are not without traces of God's fatal presence. Consistent with what has been seen in earlier phases of Melville's epistemology **Billy Budd** implies that God must be viewed as the first and foremost cause of epistemological indeterminacy and the resulting disaster of whatever one cares to call human existence. The evidence for this is so compelling that it warrants close attention.

It will be recalled that Billy's stutter, the product of numerous, unseen contingencies, is viewed by the narrator as bearing traces of the influence of the "marplot of Eden"(439). As noted earlier this particular reference lends itself quite easily to an ironic reading whereby the

marplot is in fact Eden's Creator, a figure with a vested interest in the proliferation of epistemological fractures.

Beyond this it is also significant, though not surprising, that Claggart also manages to be tainted narratively by Biblical allusion when he is characterized as a snake, most notably at his death(477). In this context it is intriguing that for the narrator such a judgment is framed by the earlier assertion that Claggart is "like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible"(459-460). Most prominent here is the implication that the snake may not have been exercising anything worthy of the name "choice". His predicament, like the scorpion's, is the product of irremediable determinism such that Nature can be viewed as an instrument of God, one guaranteeing not only the method of divine control but also the inevitablilty of divine responsibility. Thus Billy's stutter, Claggart's depravity and even Capt. Vere's adherence to forms are indistinguishable from acts of God. This is entirely consistent with the concept of God and its relation to orchestrated uncertainty delineated in the earlier works discussed in this thesis.

That catastrophe is ultimately the handiwork of God is further encouraged by the narrator's sarcastic observation that "a chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War - Mars"(495). In a world utterly devoid of even marginal stability it would

seem reasonably likely that the agenda of the Prince of Peace is anything but peaceful. In fact Melville's God is perpetually at war with the products of Creation, suggesting that it is not a coincidence to find the Bellipotent's chaplain in the employ of the "God of War", the only God there is. The chaplain is ordained to function in a war-zone specifically designed to destroy the possibility of acquiring knowledge. Thus he is oddly reminiscent of God's agent in **The Confidence-Man**. By the time Billy has been convicted, a conviction guaranteed by God's maintenance of epistemological anarchy, it is quite fitting that he refuses to speak to the chaplain(495). As a symbol of Melville's inquiry Billy is silent because God has been indicted with no possibility for rehabilitation.

Given the persistence of multiple perspectives of interpretation hovering in the story's bakcground, it is significant that the narrator's carefully worded account of Billy's hanging proves to be loaded with implications subjected to a high degree of concealment.

> At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn.(497)

Perhaps the hanging's first point of reference is that of legality, one subsumed in the passage above within the narrator's elliptical invocation of the term "fleece". Just

as the law in "Bartleby" and even "Benito Cereno" became the means of generating suffering, it is clear that Billy Budd, as Lawrance Thompson has suggested(408), has been "fleeced" by the court and Capt. Vere insofar as a verdict purporting to represent a firm understanding of a sequence of events has actually failed in its claims. This line of thought is encouraged when "fleece" is aligned with "the Lamb of God", suggesting that a sacrificial lamb known as Billy Budd has been offered up on the altar of a flawed legal structure owing its ultimate existence to the idiosynocracies of the Creator.

"Fleece", however, in its association with the lamb also suggests the threat of whiteness, one oddly reminiscent of the white fleecy hat announcing the arrival of the first avatar of God's agent in **The Confidence-Man**. Lambs figuratively led to the slaughter aboard the Fidèle are now executed aboard the Bellipotent and in this act of violence in the name of a higher purpose one can detect an additional encrypted allusion to the parallel fate of God's own Lamb, the Son subjected to suffering (as myth would have it) by a Father whose teleological concerns in the Melvillean sense are something less than compassionate. Thus the metaphor of the law, the concept of God and the symbolic significance of whiteness and fleecing are intertwined to produce the suggestion of a lethally fractured teleology, one of

unavoidable victimization at the hands of a God with a propensity for terrorism.

When Billy is suspended from God's noose human inquiry and the dream of knowledge as certainty are strangled beyond resuscitation. The anticipation of this moment, however, occurs slightly earlier when the narrator invokes the symbol of the rainbow in an act of poetic circularity with Moby-Dick.

> Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other?(479)

Although the rainbow is initially invoked in the context of the narrator's attempt to account for Capt. Vere's state of mind, it would appear likely that its symbolic application is considerably broader. In the light, as it were, of Melville's inquiry the rainbow is a figure of epistemological distance, one deceptively creating the illusion of the solidity or safety of broad outlines while clouding minute, component details. This structural predicament is reminiscent of the more commonplace newsprint photo which fades into a bewildering mass of dots upon close examination.

The dynamics at work within Melville's handling of the rainbow are clearly Humean insofar as this figure, in mirroring key aspects of an ongoing inquiry, suggests that events and what purports to be the persistent presence of

stable entities are reducible to impressions whose very nature is highly problematic. Thus the rainbow's implications ripple far beyond questions of sanity and insanity or even guilt and innocence. In the end the rainbow, traditionally a symbol of hope, ironically casts existence into the grainy, indefinable borders of its color bands suggesting that for Melville the universe is pervaded by an ontological rainbow, a curvature of being which somehow eludes tracking.

Seemingly clear from a distance but suspiciously grainy on approach the rainbow is the epistemological equivalent of the various mirages generated by Melville's prismatic examination of the color white in **Moby-Dick**. Both are signposts of the threat of uncertainty, the unceasing undermining of the security of belief. In its state of diffraction the rainbow is the terminal point of penetration to be undergone by **Moby-Dick**'s "colorless, all-color" state of affairs. The ominous circularity of this poetic effect announces the Humean failure to know. Philosophy has been overrun by hopelessness and God is still beyond reach, still perpetuating orchestrated anarchy with impunity.

In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that on the basis of my particular reading much of Melville's late fiction could be viewed as an effort to provide answers to a number of inter-related questions: What can be known? How can one be certain that one actually knows something? Is it

possible and indeed likely that nothing can be known with certainty and therefore nothing is safe? If this is the case where does responsibility lie for such a catastrophe? What of the perceived duress attendant upon this predicament? Is there a point beyond which the imperfections of what is provisionally termed "everyday life" undermine the very purpose for its undertaking?

Melville's epistemological approach to these questions is essentially that of David Hume's radical skepticism, the most notable exceptions being his continued adherence to a belief in God and an implied theory of linguistic indeterminacy. The Humean aspect of Melville's epistemology has been demonstrated throughout his work via the structural pattern that I have cited in each of the preceding chapters. The result within this sphere of inquiry has been a corrosive questioning of the nature of the external world and events allegedly transpiring within it, the nature of human agency and the self and an inquiry into the efficacy of reasoning.

God, for Melville, emerges onto the scene as the result of a puzzling predicament. The mind, such as it is, persistently and indeed conspicuously fails to grasp whatever it seems to be scrutinizing. In fact it cannot even verify its own existence. Failure which is this pervasive arouses a suspicion that what appears to be disorder may actually be ordered concealment. The universe

becomes not so much a meaningless place as one deliberately barricaded from epistemological view. Only a God with something to hide could bring about such calculated ambiguity. In this manner skepticism achieves a paradoxical alignment with theism.

The final point on which Melville's epistemology could be said to deviate from Hume is that of language's indeterminacy. Rather than being voiced consistently by narrators or other characters, this position is illustrated through its indirect association with the structural pattern I have chosen to study. The theory suggested by Melville is one whereby language invariably spins out of control, no longer connecting with anything but its own dangerous, self-referential tendencies. This is a stance which I believe has been shown to be quite similar to that of Derridean deconstruction. It must be stressed, however, that this Melvillean view of language is not held to be a consequence of Humean indeterminacy but instead an accompanying disaster.

If a snapshot could be taken of the Melvillean landscape it would reveal a hopelessly scarred terrain whose inhabitants, relentlessly enigmatic, can barely be glimpsed in the surrounding haze scrambling for cover in the violent wake of safety's disappearance.

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